

H. P. BLAVATSKY, THEOSOPHY, AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY COMPARATIVE  
RELIGION

BY

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## Abstract

Although H. P. Blavatsky (1831-1891), co-founder of the Theosophical Society, has featured prominently in histories of Western esotericism, her engagement with late nineteenth-century comparative religion has not been appreciated. This thesis offers the first sustained analysis of H. P. Blavatsky's theosophical comparative religion. Despite the fact that one of the original goals of the Theosophical Society was advancing comparative religion, H. P. Blavatsky has been excluded from standard accounts of the field. This thesis draws on a range of theoretical resources—Richard Rorty's pragmatic theory of knowledge, Alun Munslow's analysis of narrative in history, Thomas Gieryn's critique of boundary-making in science, and Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison's history of objectivity—to argue for the inclusion of H. P. Blavatsky in the history of comparative religion. Substantial chapters analyse H. P. Blavatsky's major works, from *Isis Unveiled* (1877) to *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), to uncover the theoretical template that she developed for analysing religion and comparing religions. The thesis highlights H. P. Blavatsky's interpretative strategies in fashioning a theosophical comparative religion. In developing a comparative religion, H. P. Blavatsky referred to leading figures in the emerging field of the academic study of religion, such as F. Max Müller, E. B. Tylor, and Herbert Spencer, in positioning her theosophical comparative religion in the context of late nineteenth-century production of knowledge about religion and religions. This thesis demonstrates that H. P. Blavatsky's comparative religion was reasoned, literary, rhetorical, coherent, and strategic. By analysing H. P. Blavatsky's theoretical work on religion and religions in its late nineteenth-century context, this thesis contributes to the ongoing project of broadening our understanding of the complex and contested history of the study of religion.

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### 1) PREFACE

This study examines the writings of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky as an exercise in comparative religion in the late nineteenth century. Its primary component will be an exploration of the nature and content of her comparative enterprise. This exploration identifies textual links to a selection of actors in the broader field of comparative religion and provides insight into the nature of the field in the nineteenth century and the boundary-marking mechanisms and assumptions which excluded Blavatsky from it. My focus is on the scientific debates of the nineteenth century, though other issues are implied, for example, class and gender distinctions as they relate to knowledge production and cultural acceptance. Through a process of re-description I will remove Blavatsky's work from the margins of current and past research in the field, both of which reflect essentialist assumptions, and situate her as a legitimate student of religion having justifiable insights worthy of recognition in mainstream thought. In conversation with criticisms aimed at the early founders of the field, her research and work in comparative religion will prove to be as insightful as those lauded contributors to the field. This journey will include a broad review of the origins of the field of comparative religion in the late nineteenth century in the light of recent theories in various academic fields which aim to root out essentialist thought patterns inherited from the past.

Potential entry points are many, but a statement from Blavatsky's first major work, *Isis Unveiled* (1877), brings to the fore many of the issues examined in this study. She writes, "Such are the glimpses which anthropology affords us of men, either arrived at the bottom of a cycle or starting in a new one. Let us see how far they are corroborated by clairvoyant psychometry" (1988a, vol. I, 295). For the sake of this thesis I collapse into one category séance phenomena, spiritualistic phenomena, and the occult sciences. While these do have different histories and trajectories, they offered a similar broad challenge to materialistic positions of the nineteenth century. In the extract above, Blavatsky addressed the nineteenth century, and a number of questions present themselves. What voice is speaking? Who is the intended audience? What conditions of knowledge allow for the seamless shift from anthropology to psychometry? Is it irrational, ignorant, a stubborn survival, or are other factors at play? What are the implied sources of authority (cultural, scientific, political, and intellectual)? What power struggles of the past, the results of which underpin our most



pervasive and hidden assumptions, are here alluded to? And lastly, what conditions our personal response to the statement? The passage hints at the boundary labour of the past and present, and evokes any number of binaries which require attention, including: science/pseudo-science, scholar/amateur, rational/irrational, science/religion, knowledge/faith, and objectivity/subjectivity. The essentialist and dualistic nature of binary constructions have been directly challenged since the 1970s, and the complicated repercussions of this activity have wide-ranging implications.

The rationale behind this work is to offer a new perspective on the origins of comparative religion emerging in the late nineteenth century. This formative period in the field of comparative religion will be reassessed through the work of a forgotten actor, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), co-founder of the Theosophical Society. The historical influence of the Theosophical Society in the areas of Western esotericism and the New Age has been noted by many scholars (Godwin 1994; Hanegraaff 1998; Hammer 2004; Goodrick-Clarke 2008). I will, however, argue that Blavatsky participated in the more mainstream concerns related to comparative religion in her time and that she should not be excluded from the histories of this field.<sup>1</sup> Nor should her contribution be confined or solely linked to any imagined esoteric current of thought. This re-contextualising of her work will reveal the contested nature of various knowledge claims in the nineteenth century. Recent studies in the field of comparative religion reflect a qualified acknowledgement of Blavatsky's interpretive enterprise (Chidester 2014, 257-86; Scott 2016, 177-206; Viswanathan 2016, 185-200). These studies uncritically presume a mark that Theosophical thought failed to meet. This standard, however, reflects a century and a half of decisions, debates, methodological assumptions, power struggles, inclusions, and exclusions which, in the light of pragmatic trends in contemporary scholarship, are open to reassessment.

I will argue that Blavatsky's Theosophical statement is a work of comparative religion itself—a statement that is more often read as a body of doctrines or teachings. The aim of this study is to recover Blavatsky's enterprise in comparative religion, a consequence of which would be her inclusion in histories of the broader field. Through a re-orientation of perspective, a re-description, a new narrative will emerge. My critique is directed not at the various historical theories of religion from the nineteenth century; rather, it is directed at the

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<sup>1</sup> Though not uncontested, the field of comparative religion is often dated to the 1870s with the work of Max Müller (Sharpe 1986, xi; Harrison 1990, 81-106).

standard histories of this period and at the boundary work that occurred during that period. A new history will not replace existing narratives but will, instead, add a new gaze from which the field can be reviewed. A sensitively contextualised reading of Blavatsky's works and a re-evaluation of the assumptions inherent in the field of comparative religion are the chief methods required to accomplish this task.

## 2) LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature survey encompasses the scope of this thesis, which is the history of comparative religion, the academic field of Western esotericism and its engagement with Blavatsky, and the scholarship of the Theosophical Society as they each pertain to Blavatsky's enterprise in comparative religion. A broad mapping of the academic literature will show an initial period of boundary-marking in the late nineteenth century, during which period Blavatsky's work was rejected. This was followed by long period of silence, marked by the absence of any engagement with Theosophy. In the 1980s and 1990s Theosophy becomes a topic of academic study under the emerging field of Western esotericism, with primarily peripheral or incidental reference to Blavatsky's comparative religion. Theosophy tentatively re-enters the field of comparative religion in 2014 with Chidester's *Empire of Religion*, and has subsequently become increasingly recognized.

### 2.1) History of Comparative Religion

The history of comparative religion has been outlined in a number of standard works. These include Jan de Vries's *Perspectives in the History of Religions* (1977), Eric J. Sharpe's *Comparative Religion* (1986), J. Samuel Preus's *Explaining Religion* (1987), Walter H. Capps's *Religious Studies* (1995), and Ivan Strenski's *Thinking about Religion* (2006). Sharpe makes a brief and insubstantial mention of the Theosophical Society and comparative religion in his work, but this work is not sufficiently historicist (1986, 256). Some of these studies have pragmatic (that is to say anti-essentialist and historicist) intentions, though none show any serious intention to re-read the past in the light of these methodological tools and insert excluded participants. Strenski, as a notable example, is concerned with the justificatory background of early theories and theorists of religion (2006, 3-4). His focus, however, on the usual actors, such as F. Max Müller, E. B. Tylor, James G. Frazer, William

Robertson Smith, and others, leave the inherited history of the field un-rehabilitated. Indicative of the period of absence are Jordan's early *Comparative Religion: Its Genesis and Growth* (1905) and Carpenter's *Comparative Religion* (1913) that make no reference to Blavatsky or Theosophy.

Current theoretical perspectives available to scholars have yet to have their full potential realised in terms of undoing the inherited narratives of the past. Tomoko Masuzawa, referring to nineteenth-century comparative theology (a precursor to comparative religion) and the paucity of women writers in the field, manages to refer to the Theosophist Annie Besant in a footnote and notes, "Her [Besant's] treatises, however, are written from an expressly Theosophical point of view, which make them rather atypical" (2005, 75). That she is unable, or unwilling, to mention Blavatsky, a woman and surely Besant's equal, suggests an uncritical acceptance of past discourses of the field. The description as "atypical" simply preserves and perpetuates the inherited prejudices of the past. David Chidester in his *Empire of Religion* (2014) has written Theosophy back into the field of nineteenth-century comparative religion. For Chidester, Theosophical comparative religion is anti-Christian, based on secretism, resembles/mimics/shadows critical scholarship, and is based on occultist premises. Its authenticity is based on an esoteric wisdom tradition and secret teachings of the East. This reading, however, retains a residual hierarchical structuring which privileges existing mainstream comparative religion narratives. I argue that a more charitable historical contextualising of Blavatsky's efforts will render untenable such privileging. More recently, J. Barton Scott's *Spiritual Despots: Modern Hinduism and the Genealogies of Self-Rule* (2016) and Gauri Viswanathan's chapter on Blavatsky in *Religious Dynamics under the Impact of Imperialism and Colonialism: A Sourcebook* (2016) show increasing awareness of the Theosophical interpretive endeavour. This unfolding trajectory calls for a review of the initial period of boundary work.

The above studies refer primarily to histories of comparative religion. I adopt a pragmatic and narrative theoretical base, and in terms of methodological perspectives in the field I locate myself within existing movements. An example of a narrative reflection on religion is Gavin Flood's *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (1999), where he discusses the value of contextual readings of the past and of religion as narrative. I will discuss my own theoretical grounding in Richard Rorty's pragmatism, with its narrative implications, later in this chapter. In some ways my work will rest uneasily within Flood's thesis. He has oriented himself *within* the results of the boundary disputes of the nineteenth century. For example, his

use of terms such as “science,” “theology,” and “metaphysical” is problematic. One can witness his position when referring to the truth claims of traditions or religions where he can note that his internal coherence theory is premised on “the contention that the central doctrinal claims of religions are not empirical claims, at least in the late twentieth century” (Flood 1999, 171). I am working within a period, the late nineteenth century, in which the provinces of these terms are up for negotiation, and wherein Theosophy certainly made empirical claims. My own contribution is not a methodological overhaul of theories of religion. These theories, like my own work, are historically situated. My contribution is the application of Rortyan pragmatic insights to a particular historical period, the late nineteenth century, and to a specific marginalised actor, H. P. Blavatsky. My work, then, is part of the undoing of the past as currently premised in the present state of the field.

To level the field I could move in two potential directions. I could read all enterprises in comparative religion in the late nineteenth century ironically, or, I could read them all as serious attempts to produce knowledge. Practically, that means I could either critique (or reflect critiques of) existing nineteenth-century scholars and read Blavatsky’s work in a similar judgmental light, or, I could “elevate” the writings of Blavatsky to the status of justifiable. As an example of what I mean, the following is a recent assessment of Max Müller’s mythological comparisons,

This was Müller’s lack of a stringent method, for despite his recurrent appeals to the force of irrefutable etymological correspondences, the reconstructions which he proposed more often than not had a shaky linguistic basis, consisting to a large extent of associative flights of fancy based on a highly eclectic use of the evidence and a specifically romantic view of religion. (Maier 2012, 503)

Not a ringing endorsement of the founder of a field. The question is: Must H. P. Blavatsky “raise her game” to meet this nineteenth-century standard, or, are the familiar actors to be “reduced” to her level? Or, perhaps, certain types of valuing are best forgotten. The broad point I make here is that with the re-evaluation of early theorists in the light of contemporary perspectives one would anticipate a corresponding review of forgotten and marginalised participants. But this has not been forthcoming.

## 2.2) Academic Studies of Theosophy

Studies of Theosophy and the Theosophical Society are broadly located in the academic field of Western esotericism. The studies of Bruce Campbell, Joscelyn Godwin, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Olav Hammer, Antoine Faivre, Kocku von Stuckrad, Garry. W. Trompf, Egil Asprem, James A. Santucci, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, Robert Ellwood, and others are well-known. Primarily, incidental mention of Blavatsky's comparative religion is evident, though, some studies, such as Hammer's *Claiming Knowledge*, present a deeper engagement with her interpretive methods. Existing scholarship, however, reflects a number of general points which require to be engaged.

In this study I assess the work of Blavatsky alone. I am not examining her contemporary or later Theosophists, nor am I reviewing movements often associated with the Theosophical Society, such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn or the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor. I do not seek an overarching definition of "esotericism," Western or otherwise. Blavatsky did adopt the designation of "esotericist" and "occultist," however, the use of these terms does not necessarily mean that she slotted herself into larger narratives hatched in the academic environment of the 1990s to the present. Bergunder illustrates this issue in what is one of the most useful studies on the definition of "esotericism" available. Discussing esotericism as an empty signifier and an identity marker he states that, "Esotericism as an identity positioning has its place in a *religious* discourse field" [my italics] (2010, 25). In the period I am discussing the bounds between religion and science, as well as other discourses, is under negotiation, not given.<sup>2</sup>

We might ask ourselves: If Theosophy is positioned as an esoteric discourse, and is involved in comparative religion, is there an esoteric comparative religion? Does it have any hermeneutic power to generate such a category? Two problems arise. The first is to define what "esoteric" means in this context. Given the ongoing definitional debates, and the notion that definitions are purpose specific, it is not clear how this definitional problem will be overcome, or, if overcome, will not be self-fulfilling.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, it appears that much of this defining may be running afoul of Davidson's third dogma of empiricism – the scheme-content binary. There is only one world, and we are all living in it and responding to it (Davidson 1973-1974; Davidson 1989; Ramberg 1989, 38-48; Rorty 1999, 33). Davidson

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<sup>2</sup> The "conflict thesis" between religion and science in the nineteenth century has been under revision for some time.

<sup>3</sup> See Bergunder (2010) for an outline of problems surrounding attempts to define esotericism.

shows that there is no scheme which cannot be made sense of, that is, there are no incommensurable schemes. There is, in fact, no scheme-content division at all. The debates, therefore, inevitably move toward justificatory assessments which require broad historical contextualising. Put slightly differently, could H. P. Blavatsky be existing in a different linguistic community from, for example, Tylor, Max Müller, or Tyndall? Is she using an incommensurable vocabulary which reflects some alternate rationality? Or, was she very much speaking the language and reflecting the underlying rationality of the larger society? I suggest that there is no edifying methodological reason to read Theosophical comparative religion out of the history of comparative religion. As such, the space in which Theosophy is contextualised becomes important. This is not an idle question if we compare Godwin's *The Theosophical Enlightenment* with Chidester's *Empire of Religion*. Chidester can locate Theosophical efforts within the field of comparative religion, while Godwin has contextualised Theosophy in the esoteric and occult currents from the eighteenth century onwards. I will cut across previous readings of Theosophy by centring my study on the works of H. P. Blavatsky and by focusing on her enterprise in comparative religion.

If we regard Blavatsky's Theosophy as a unit, a sentence, we can ask: in what "language" is it to be located? What is the larger contextualising whole which will give meaning to the Theosophical statement? I move here to invoke a semantic or meaning holism in the study of religion. The answer to the question, of course, is the late nineteenth century in its entirety, not just peripheral movements, trends, and fields within it. Typological and historically based theories are typically proposed in the academic field of Western esotericism, and Theosophical thought is usually subsumed into one of these approaches (Hanegraaff 2006, 337-8). One concern with current, broader narratives is that they relegate specific movements, in this case Theosophy, to a unit place in a larger diachronic discourse. This "colours" the unit, which becomes problematic when the narratives are not sufficiently synchronically informed and situated. Naturally, I am arguing that existing narrative placements have inadequately contextualised the writings of Blavatsky in their synchronic environment.

It is my position that a careful synchronic assessment of her work in the light of current research and methodologies should be the starting point. A synchronic stance emphasises the explanatory value of a holistic perspective, which I will stress throughout this study. The narrative in this instance is the synchronic field of actors and events. This still leaves the question of which synchronic fields she should be located in and against. There is also the

question as to when a synchronic period begins and ends. These are issues to be worked out through processes of negotiation and experiment. From my perspective this is best approached through her works and the fields therein referenced, including the various contemporary sciences, spiritualism, history, philosophy, religion, and the “occult sciences”.<sup>4</sup> These references reveal the issues which concerned her and with which she, along with many late nineteenth-century actors, engaged. I will examine her works as honest, literary, rhetorical, argumentative, rational, and reasoned responses to the issues of the day. The issues themselves will be drawn from her works. Foucault refers to a “useless erudition” which he restates as “subjugated knowledges” (1980, 79, 81). I want to emphasise the “knowledge” half of this term. My larger aim is to read H. P. Blavatsky’s perspectives as equal to “non-subjugated” knowledge. I suspect that the continuing attempts to define “esotericism” functions, in part, to keep separate certain chosen discourses.<sup>5</sup> I am, however, deliberately making no grand claims as to where all “esoteric” movements should be placed. I am dealing, instead, specifically with the Theosophy of H. P. Blavatsky as it relates to comparative religion. It is my argument that the Theosophical work of Blavatsky is not to be solely located in esoteric streams, but rather she is to be read as a participant in the mainstream debates of the day, drawing justifiable conclusions from the information available. Her intellectual links to more mainstream positions have been undervalued and under-researched thus far.

A further concern is that current perspectives on Theosophy perpetuate inherited opinions of the past. An example of this can be found in Olav Hammer’s *Claiming Knowledge* (2004). The shortcomings of a work like this are outlined in Massimo Introvigne’s review of Hammer’s text (2014).<sup>6</sup> Hammer’s normative work combines in one theoretical frame participants as diverse as H. P. Blavatsky, Rupert Sheldrake, and Shirley MacLaine. For him, they share one important characteristic: they are “claiming knowledge” to which they have no entitlement. Hammer, of course, seems to feel that he has made no such error. His critical skills have insulated him from the lesser minds which he studies. His master narrative,

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<sup>4</sup> One need only review the bibliographies of *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* to note that her interests were not confined to occult or esoteric sources.

<sup>5</sup> See Asprem (2014, 7-11), where he makes this very point in relation to academic boundary work and Western esotericism as it struggles to become an acceptable subject. Ironically this is virtually the opposite movement from that in late nineteenth century when mainstream sciences were conducting the boundary work.

<sup>6</sup> This is not to say the work has no value, and it has made many interesting observations on specific traditions and practices. It is the universalising scope and the assumption that “esotericists” are over “there” doing something us “scholars” over here would never do that I find problematic.

however, collapses under the weight of its own details. It is simply not convincing for every person he mentions, historically spanning at least 150 years, to be subsumed into one overarching theory or trajectory. As scholars unpack the specific details of individual actors his smoothing assumptions will be revealed. As an example of this I have extracted his statements on the lost continent of Lemuria, which became an important part of Blavatsky's speculation in the *Secret Doctrine*. Referencing "esoteric" uses, he mentions Lemuria in relation to Reiki, Rudolf Steiner, Edgar Cayce, and Theosophy. I review here only his statements as they pertain to Theosophy. For Hammer, Theosophy is "constructing" an historical tradition which elements are loosely, Lemuria, Atlantis, Egypt and India (2004, 54). Lemuria and Atlantis are "imaginary utopias" with imaginary civilizations (2004, 99). Then, on pages 100-101, he discusses the origin of the idea of Lemuria, which is to be found in the mainstream sciences with Ernst Haeckel and Philip L. Sclater. Here is the important sentiment, Hammer continues, "Every position within the Esoteric Tradition has had its own idea of what aspects of science were interesting. Each position has also had its own cultural context from which to draw ideas and inspiration. Lemuria was a legitimate and interesting biological theory during the 1880s, when Blavatsky appropriated the idea for her own purposes" (2004, 260). A "legitimate and interesting biological theory during the 1880s"—could this phrase hint at a new context for Blavatsky's works? What were the legitimate speculations of science around lost continents in the late nineteenth century? What logical inferences could be made from various scientific positions? And, which coherent conclusions could be drawn from the scientific speculations of the day? Is it possible that she fell within the limits of such speculation? I would argue that, in the light of Ramaswamy's *The Lost Land of Lemuria* (2004, 53-96), it is possible to read Blavatsky on Lemuria in just this manner. A proper assessment of Blavatsky would require a more detailed synchronic study and a separation of her work from the diachronic development of the Theosophical tradition after her. This is not to argue that everything she proposed would have already been said by any particular scientist, and she certainly inhabits the "vanishing points" of science. I will argue that the sciences of the late nineteenth century were considerably more internally diverse than often presented, and still in the process of being negotiated into what we now accept as their current normative forms. Blavatsky's works represent one woven narrative of the ideas and resources available in the late nineteenth century.

In his recent work, *Esotericism and the Academy* (2013), Wouter Hanegraaff tracks the elements of Western esotericism from late antiquity to the present. He works to identify the



various currents and positionings which form the foundation of contemporary esotericism stances. In this work he has little specific to say about H. P. Blavatsky and Theosophy. He makes reference to the accusations of plagiarism against her, and evaluates her enterprise in comparative religion as “idiosyncratic” (2013, 243, 273).<sup>7</sup> It is unclear what he means by idiosyncratic, which has two senses – “peculiar” or “individual”. It seems unlikely he means “individual,” as he links her work to that of Emma Hardinge Britten, and if he actually meant “individual” it would be superfluous as surely every person’s work is their own. The general sense of Hanegraaff’s work suggests he has “peculiar” in mind. What, however, does he mean by this? The range of potential meanings in English is wide – from pejorative associations to laudatory ones. I suspect he has pejorative associations in mind. For an entirely different view on the virtues of idiosyncrasy, and one which I endorse, one could review Richard Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1993, 24, 33, 197). Here the idiosyncratic individual is the strong poet, the self-creator, living life in the best way possible. Idiosyncratic ideas in turn can become domesticated if accepted by society, or ridiculed if rejected by later reviewers. This reveals a weakness of Hanegraaff’s historiography. His attempt to accurately “mirror” debates of the past is, firstly, impossible, and, secondly, functions to reify, reproduce, and perpetuate categories read into and from the past. Mirroring without interpreting is, in practical and theoretical terms, not possible as all history telling has a narrative quality involving selection and rejection. I will pursue this theme later in this chapter with a discussion of Richard Rorty and Alun Munslow.

Hanegraaff’s reliance on a methodological agnosticism was signalled in his well-known article, “Empirical Method in the Study of Esotericism” (1995). Reading his section on the “reductionism” versus the “empirical option,” a few challenges are revealed. Firstly, he projects current divisions of physical versus metaphysical into the past. The late nineteenth century was a period of negotiation of these categories. Secondly, it does not allow him to distinguish between what a person is saying as opposed to what they are doing by making a particular claim. For example, if an “esotericist” were to make a claim to knowledge through mystical *gnosis*, Hanegraaff neither contextualises the claim in terms of justifiability, nor can he assess what it means to make such a claim in a particular place at a particular time. It is true that H. P. Blavatsky’s thoughts were peripheral in the late nineteenth century, but on what basis is that valuing to be continued into the present? The work of most late nineteenth-

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<sup>7</sup> More recently Gauri Viswanathan can refer to H. P. Blavatsky as “first and foremost a theorist of religion,” though still making use of “idiosyncratic” methods (2016, 173). Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm similarly refers to the Theosophical Society’s “idiosyncratic concepts in a range of domains” (2017, 120).

century theorists of comparative religion have been decentred in the field. If her work is idiosyncratic, we ask, in relation to what norm? No nineteenth-century scholar of religion has had their work uncritically accepted in the current field. Criticisms of, for example, Max Müller, are well-known, but others too have not escaped critique. Chidester, for example, can argue that Tylor's animism is not a reliable entry point into the study of religion. It is too enmeshed in the political and colonial activities of the time (Chidester 2005, 81). Hanegraaff, I suggest, has accepted the categorisations of the past, a natural function of his methodology perhaps, but one which is insufficiently revisionist and can say little about the subject at hand.

Hanegraaff's work is also insufficiently synchronic in terms of the span of positions available in the sciences in the late nineteenth century. It essentialises various late nineteenth-century fields of knowledge, which inevitably reinforces his argument for exclusion and rejection. His work, in short, is as theory laden as any other approach and subject to the same criticisms (Otto 2013, 234, 236). In the case of Blavatsky, Hanegraaff is insufficiently revisionist and this leaves him unable to challenge the assumptions of the past (Pasi 2013, 204, 209-10). To reverse my point, if Western esotericism is simply a "waste basket" of rejected knowledge, which is potentially filled with a wide variety of unconnected positions united only by the fact of their rejection (i.e. no substance uniting them), then we must revisit the nature of the "monolithic rejector" (Hammer 2013, 245). What entity, identity, cultural standpoint, is in a position to reject a wide variety of discourses and remain unitary itself? This thesis challenges value positions of the past so that a more representative picture can emerge.

This type of academic activity is related to another—the selective application of theoretical tools. By accepting categorisations of the past, current scholars see historical material in different ways. For example, H. P. Blavatsky's comparative religion is somehow wanting, while Tylor's or Max Müller's were noble efforts of the field. This negative valuing and separating out of categories is reinforced by the selective use of contemporary theory. An article which illustrates this is Andrew Dawson's "East is East, Except when it's West" (2006). Dawson is critiquing the "Easternization thesis" where it had been argued that the West had begun appropriating Eastern concepts, teachings, philosophies, and practices, to the excising of Western habits. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, Dawson suggests that the "western gaze" essentially seeks itself. He notes, "I conclude that irrespective of their exotic appearance and despite the subjective intentions of adherents and practitioners, the Eastern concepts and practices that are increasingly common in the West actually do little

more than refract the modern Western habitus back on to itself” (2006, 10). Examples of Western endeavours (and individuals) guilty of this include, “Blavatsky,” “Steiner,” “Gurdjieff,” and late nineteenth- and twentieth-century esoteric and new age movements (2006, 2). This gaze, we must assume, is deeply rooted in the orientation of individuals, below the level of conscious action, despite what Dawson notes in the quote below. These characteristics guide the individuals to seek what they recognize and can therefore more easily appropriate. He writes,

Such appropriation, however, was neither wholesale nor uncritical, but comprised a self-conscious and selective remodelling of Eastern themes along lines determined by existing esoteric/theosophical preoccupations (Hanegraaff: 471-72). Referring to late-twentieth century appropriations as part of his own critique of the “Easternization thesis,” Hamilton notes that in “many instances the form in which Eastern religions have influenced the West is...significantly modified to suit Western circumstances or in accordance with the specific interests or prejudices of Western scholars (247).” [3] Although Hanegraaff, Hammer, and Hamilton do well to note the qualified appropriation of eastern themes by late-nineteenth and twentieth century esoteric and new age movements respectively, they do not identify the hermeneutical dynamics that have informed this process of selective appropriation. (2006, 2)

Every insight and shortcoming listed above could surely be applied to E. B. Tylor, Max Müller, Andrew Lang, and any number of scholars of religion. Is it possible that these quintessential Europeans were immune to the Western *habitus* which infected Blavatsky and others? Are scholarly methodologies such that they allow for objective realising of the subject? H. P. Blavatsky, I suggest, was engaged in comparative religion in the same manner as any other actor in the field, regardless of whether we see that as useful scholarship or constructivist fantasies.

Kocku von Stuckrad has applied a theoretical perspective to Blavatsky in his *The Scientification of Religion* with which I share much in common, though I wish to distinguish my work from his (2014, 94-110). As he did not present a detailed study of any specific Theosophical theme in his study, I cannot properly assess the potential fruit of his work. Stuckrad proposes a discursive analysis in which Blavatsky is conceptualised as a “discursive hub” wherein various discourse strands are drawn together. Certainly, I share Stuckrad’s interest in the application of a “sociology of knowledge” perspective and a dense historicism. His call for a relativistic perspective over a realist reading of science is also one I endorse

(2014, 2, 9). Adopting a relativistic or constructivist position is not an indication of an ontological commitment or lack thereof. Rather, a relativistic position should be seen as an antidote to the “poison” of inherited normative readings of the past. Relativism is an opening gambit which enables an uncritical and open stance towards all positions taken by participants in past debates. As a technique, it must be followed by an attempt to justify the various positions proposed. I have adopted three insights which I find missing in Stuckrad. The first is an appreciation of Daston and Galison’s epistemic codes. As I will illustrate later in this chapter, the interpretive and justifying power of their “truth-to-nature” code is too explanatory to be ignored. Secondly, Stuckrad has not emphasised the process of narrative *selection* that is undertaken by both the researcher and subject. Choices are made by the academic (the author-historian) and their subject as stories are woven from the material at hand. Finally, the entry point selected by the researcher/academic is both idiosyncratic and arbitrary. The choices made will affect the nature of the narrative which is finally presented. I am unable to pursue this in detail, but part of my concern with Stuckrad is not only over aspects of his methodological orientation. In addition, I take issue with some of his explanatory choices. One example is that he has endorsed inherited narratives which determinately link Theosophy and esotericism, which is not especially interesting or explanatory.

Examples of the perspective I intend to follow can be seen in the following three references. The first is by Christopher M. Hutton and John E. Joseph, who discuss Theosophy and modern linguistics in “Back to Blavatsky: The Impact of Theosophy on Modern Linguistics” (1998). They reread the history of linguistics “without the prior imposition of a sense of progress,” which allows for excluded actors to be assessed. After quoting Blavatsky they note, “The *summa* of Blavatsky’s theosophy, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), includes a theory of language development which in some respects is eerily similar to much academic theorising of the time” (Hutton and Joseph 1998, 184). This is not to argue that H. P. Blavatsky was a linguist, but rather that she drew on, and used, recognizable contemporary positions in her works. Her speculations fell within the bounds of the field, which was itself in the process of formation.

The second is found in Egil Asprem’s “Pondering Imponderables: Occultism in the Mirror of Late Classical Physics” (2011). Engaging, in particular, the neo-Theosophy of Charles Webster Leadbeater and Annie Besant, he notes, “I do suggest that a more thorough understanding of the sciences of the day leads to a reconsideration of the *degree* to which

various occult systems were scientifically marginal” (2011, 133). Any particular science was characterised by a range of positions, not by one single strand of “true” and “rational” thought.

The third example is drawn from Peter J. Bowler’s *Theories of Human Evolution: A Century of Debate 1844-1944*. Discussing non-Darwinian speculations that are now rejected, he writes,

To back up the claim that we should not dismiss the earlier theories as totally unscientific, I compared them with what most of us would regard as a thoroughly “mythical” account of human origins, the theosophist interpretation of Madame Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine* of 1885 [1888?]. Blavatsky was well read in the scientific literature of her time and makes a surprisingly good effort to show that her theory of monsters, giants, and ancient civilizations is compatible with the evidence. Yet the theosophist movement was still printing exactly the same text half a century later (the edition I consulted was published in 1925), by which time a considerable amount of additional evidence had been unearthed. It is this refusal to change the theory, or even to update the ‘sacred text’ that marks the unscientific character of the movement, not the structure of the theory offered. (1986, 9)

This extract adds support to my argument that H. P. Blavatsky’s writings should be separated from later generations of Theosophical thought.

These references point to a specific period in the history of the sciences, a time before the total dominance of the modern scientific paradigm, in which various conceptualizations of science, nature, humanity, and truth were possible. The Theosophical work of H. P. Blavatsky is one such nexus of conceptualization which needs to be carefully assessed in its historical context.

### 2.3) Theosophical Scholarship

Theosophical scholarship engaging in an interpretation of religion has been ongoing since the inception of the society and is too vast to survey in detail here. There is a century and a half of Theosophical journals, books, translations of texts, and lectures dedicated to explaining the category of religion and interpreting individual religions in the light of Theosophical perspectives. This global enterprise, rooted originally in the works of H. P. Blavatsky, can be

regarded broadly as the Theosophical engagement in comparative religion. For brevity's sake I will mention two examples of Theosophical scholarship. An important early Theosophical scholar and confidant of H. P. Blavatsky was G. R. S. Mead. Mead was a university trained scholar, and recognized expert in Gnosticism. We might note that Max Müller himself recognised Mead's scholarly competency, lamenting only that he wasted it on Theosophy (Mead 1904). For our purposes, an example of his scholarship can be seen in his work, *Did Jesus Live 100 B.C.?*, originally published in 1903. In this book Mead argued that a "Jesus figure," upon whom the *New Testament* Jesus of Nazareth was based, lived approximately 100BCE. This is a standard Theosophical position, confirmed by Blavatsky and *The Mahatma Letters*. This raises issues of authority and revelation in the Theosophical Society. If Blavatsky and the *mahatmas* affirm a position, what stance can an ordinary member of the Theosophical Society take? Mead's work presents one solution. He affirms the psychic validity of certain "associates" of his, but goes on to produce a work of historical investigation which surveys the proof for the existence of Jesus (Mead 1992, 18-9). The question we ask ourselves is not whether his work is "true," but whether it is justifiable based on the historical evidence and in the context in which Mead was writing. It is relevant to note that it is quite possible to find academic positions which reflect certain Theosophical opinions, for example, that the New Testament Jesus figure did not exist, or that the New Testament was influenced by Buddhist sources.<sup>8</sup>

More recently, Theosophically sympathetic and scholarly work can be seen in David Reigle's research into Tibetan Buddhism and Theosophy.<sup>9</sup> Educated in both Sanskrit and Tibetan, Reigle has been carrying out research aimed at locating the Theosophical *Stanzas of Dzyan*. His studies into the Jonang sect of Dolpopa have given Theosophical claims of Tibetan influence a small impetus (Reigle 1999, 83-95). His original language skills remove his work from much other Theosophical scholarship, though many theosophical scholars have been proficient in relevant subject languages. Reigle's work poses many questions. For example, while he diligently searches in a critical manner for an Asian language version of the *Stanzas*, Isaac Lubelsky can refer to the *Stanzas* as "forgeries" (Lubelsky 2012, 119). Original and forgery are not unproblematic distinctions in the study of religion. Reigle and Lubelsky are both academically trained; however, they are at opposite ends of the spectrum regarding the

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<sup>8</sup> As an example, see Zacharias P. Thundy, *Buddha & Christ* (1993).

<sup>9</sup> David Reigle's work can be found in his book, *Blavatsky's Secret Books* (1999), and on his two websites, [easterntertradition.org](http://easterntertradition.org) and [prajnaquest.fr](http://prajnaquest.fr). Reigle is not a member of any Theosophical Society to my knowledge, though he is clearly sympathetic to it.

*Stanzas of Dzyan*. Is Reigle, for all his academic achievements, simply a “religionist”? Does Lubelsky have the academic credentials to assess Reigle’s original language research? These are not simple questions to answer. We might, in addition, show caution in looking for *the* perspective on the past and present. Various positions can be justifiable and subject to review. It is not simply that different communities will produce different works. David Reigle challenges the division between insider and outsider by producing legitimate scholarly works.

Theosophically oriented research is diverse and is not automatically adopted or accepted within the Theosophical Society.<sup>10</sup> There is no one who speaks on behalf of all members, or for the tradition itself. This is a partial response to Chidester’s use of Patrick Bowen’s writings on a secret African Brotherhood to exemplify Theosophical scholarship (2014, 269-76). It might be more cautious to see Bowen’s work, and any work, as the product of the author, their assumptions, and their context. Conflating it to represent a whole tradition is limiting. Bowen’s basic idea of a diffusionistic wisdom tradition spreading to Southern Africa is not irrational or lacking in coherence. Rather, it belongs to a different mode of interpretation, rooted in the assumptions of early Theosophical work.

### 3) RESEARCH PROBLEM

Theosophy and the Theosophical Society are often incidentally associated with the field of comparative religion (Hanegraaff 1998, 449; Goodrick-Clarke 2008, 200, 225; Trompf 2011, 57; Lubelsky 2012, 84; Josephson 2013, 320; Chidester 2014, 269-76; Stuckrad 2014, 98). Many, though not all, of these scholars work within the academic field of Western esotericism, and this is part of the problem. As I will argue, an appeal to Rorty’s distinction between normal and revolutionary science, an appreciation of séance phenomena as emergent sciences, and a less normative reading of the history of the late nineteenth century will result in a recasting of our understanding of the works of H. P. Blavatsky. With the primary exception of Chidester in his recent book, *Empire of Religion*, Theosophy has not featured in any detail in mainstream histories of the field of comparative religion. That is to say, it has not been placed within the historical development of the field of comparative religion. This omission is noticeable because the Theosophical Society has, since its inception, openly

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<sup>10</sup> There is, however, a distinct tension within the Theosophical Society between authoritarian and democratic principles, between revelation and freedom of thought, which is a manifestation of the characters of the two main founders, H. P. Blavatsky and H. S. Olcott. See Stephen Prothero “From Spiritualism to Theosophy: ‘Uplifting’ a Democratic Tradition” (1993) for a discussion on this theme.

displayed an interest in interpreting religion. An early revision of the second of the main objectives of the society was “To study Âryan literature, religion and science” (Ransom 1938, 548). This was consolidated into a more familiar form, “To promote the study of Aryan and other Eastern literatures, religions and sciences” (Blavatsky 1987, 306). In 1896 the revised second objective of the Theosophical Society was amended to read, “To encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science” (Ransom 1938, 552). A survey of Theosophical literature to the present reveals a concern with the interpretation of religious traditions, with comparative religion being a central element of the program of the Theosophical Society.

This exclusion is not sustainable and I will confront the forces of exclusion that came into play. No theory of nineteenth-century comparative religion has withstood a century and a half of criticism. In fact, even during the late nineteenth century, individual theories and theorists of comparative religion came under criticism from competing voices within the field. In light of these historical and contemporary assessments I will reread H. P. Blavatsky’s Theosophical endeavour in its historical context.

#### 4) UNIT OF ANALYSIS

This study encompasses two fields, the emergence of the academic field of comparative religion in the late nineteenth century, and the Theosophical works of H. P. Blavatsky. Primarily this thesis will involve a textual analysis of the two main works of Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), as exercises in comparative religion. These works, and the balance of her writings where relevant, will be read in the context of various historical developments in the late nineteenth century from which they emerged.<sup>11</sup> An intermediary section, covering the years between the publishing of *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*, will review some important works in the development of Theosophy, namely, A. O. Hume’s “Fragments of Occult Truth” (1881), A. P. Sinnett’s *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883), and *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett* (1880-1886). While not directly penned by Blavatsky these texts are intimately linked to her enterprise. The overarching disciplinary field is that of comparative religion in the nineteenth century, and I will maintain focus on H. P. Blavatsky’s enterprise in comparative religion.

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<sup>11</sup>Blavatsky’s works include 15 volumes of *Collected Writings*, sundry volumes of letters, stories, and additional published works such as *The Key to Theosophy* and *The Voice of the Silence*.



## 5) RESEARCH QUESTION

I have crystallized my interest into the following research question:

What is the nature and character of H. P. Blavatsky's enterprise in comparative religion?

From this root question flow various related concerns, including:

What methodologies and assumptions underlie the work of H. P. Blavatsky, particularly in her main works, *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*?

What social and intellectual forces and assumptions underpinned the development of the field of comparative religion in the late nineteenth century?

What forces of exclusion consigned the Theosophical hermeneutic to the fringe, or beyond, of mainstream studies of religion? This boundary work is evident at the foundation of the field of comparative religion and exists to this day.

Identifying the interpretive methods of H. P. Blavatsky will form the central and foundational part of this study.

## 6) RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Parameters were drawn around the field of comparative religion as it developed and unfolded in the late nineteenth century. The disciplining of the field required that boundaries were erected which marked criteria for exclusion/inclusion. The current field of comparative religion has inherited these initial acts of boundary work. It is my intention to review some of these initial boundaries and question their validity. Fresh perspectives and readings will tell different stories which cast new light on these formative issues.

My objective is to open the field of comparative religion in the late nineteenth century in order to insert a new actor, H. P. Blavatsky. To enable this I will question the standard histories of comparative religion and seek the conditions of inclusion and exclusion. A recovery of Blavatsky comparative enterprise and a contextualized rereading of her works will throw light on how theory is produced in given situations in response to a variety of pressures and developments in broader society.

## 7) RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 7.1) Delimiting the Field

To facilitate an assessment of H. P. Blavatsky's Theosophy in the field of comparative religion it is necessary to delimit the field. In relation to the history of the Theosophical Society this is usually approached through distinguishing between first, second, and third generation Theosophy, or, between original and neo-Theosophy/Pseudo-Theosophy. Conventionally, H. P. Blavatsky, W. Quan Judge, and H. S. Olcott (among others) are regarded as first generation Theosophists. Second generation Theosophists would include, among others, Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater (Godwin 2013, 15-32; Wessinger 2013, 33-50). This distinction is both warranted and desirable. Besant, and in particular Leadbeater, introduced new ideas into the Theosophical Society which bore less and less resemblance to those of Blavatsky (Santucci 1989, 43-4). In addition to this, the cultural and scientific context had changed in the mid 1890s and the early twentieth century. It is my view that the close link Theosophy had with science would have precipitated a re-orientation of expression. As the scientific paradigm changed, the Theosophical presentation would have attempted to adapt in response.

Limiting my study to the works of H. P. Blavatsky is an instance of internal boundary work. As Foucault alerts us, appeals to "tradition" on which to base continuity are open to suspicion (Foucault 2002, 23). There can be no simple detailing of a uniform presentation of Theosophy over time. The Theosophical Society has existed over nearly a century and a half of social, scientific, and cultural change; it is spread out over many continents and countries and has had any number of individual actors take charge and shape it. A synchronic perspective, therefore, is well suited to reveal the place of Blavatsky's Theosophy in its holistic intellectual and cultural settings. Foucault also notes that appeals to the *oeuvre* of an author as a basis of continuity will also not withstand scrutiny. As such, we might expect an unfolding and development of ideas within the work of H. P. Blavatsky over the course of her writings. I will engage in a careful reading of her works, envisaged as a comparative enterprise, looking to identify underlying organising principles and vocabulary development.

A second delimiting move that I propose is to separate the Theosophical Society from some of the esoteric societies with which it is often linked. In particular, I have in mind the

Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor.<sup>12</sup> The Golden Dawn's primary concern with ritual magic has no parallel with primary Theosophical concerns. The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor's emphasis on "practical" occultism, while likely an early concern of the Theosophical Society, was quickly overtaken by its more recognized aims (Deveney 1997, 80-4). It is in the *Inner Group Teachings* and the *Esoteric Instructions*, rather than Blavatsky's public works, that the closest parallels may be seen. There was, no doubt, a certain cross-fertilisation of ideas, and there was definitely a cross-membership. However, these two societies had different characters and aims. The placing of the Theosophical Society in the field of Western esotericism has obscured an important aspect of the nature of the Society which is its links to mainstream thought and trends. This is particularly true if one reads the Society's work from the perspective of the field of comparative religion. I will work, then, to reread H. P. Blavatsky's Theosophy back into the central debates of the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

## 7.2) Opening the Field

I begin with the current state of things. Theosophical knowledge, Theosophical epistemology, Theosophical hermeneutics, Theosophical opinion, in fact, the entire body of Theosophical thought is marginal to mainstream endeavours in any field of knowledge. At best it is a relatively popular subject of study in the field of Western esotericism. My focus is on the field of comparative religion. Despite being a foundational aim of the early Theosophical Society, and despite the fact that the Theosophical Society is still actively engaged in a comparative/interpretive study of religion, it is included in no substantial manner in mainstream histories of the field. The current most important exception is David Chidester's *Empire of Religion: Imperialism & Comparative Religion* (2014, 269-76) where "Theosophical Comparative Religion" is discussed. I suggest, therefore, that Theosophy can qualify as a "subjugated knowledge" as detailed by Foucault in his *Power/Knowledge* lectures. For Foucault, subjugated knowledge can be characterised as being "buried," "disguised," "inadequate," "disqualified," "insufficiently elaborated," "naïve," and

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<sup>12</sup> For the Golden Dawn see Howe, Ellic, *The Magicians of the Golden Dawn: A Documentary History of a Magical Order 1887-1923* (1985) and Gilbert, R. A. *The Golden Dawn and the Esoteric Section* (1987). On the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor see Godwin, J., Chanel, C., and Deveney, J. P. *The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor: Initiatic and Historical documents of an order of practical occultism* (1995). See Owen, Alex, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (2007) for a work which discusses all Theosophy and the Golden Dawn, amongst other occult groups.

“beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” (1980, 81-2). Foucault refers to a “Freemasonry of useless erudition,” and we might adapt this as a “Theosophy of useless erudition” (1980, 79). While Theosophical oriented scholars are currently engaged in interpretive endeavours using Theosophical tools, mainstream comparative religion is referring to Theosophy as an inadequate, or “idiosyncratic,” relic of the past (Hanegraaff 2013, 243).

To account for this exclusion—this split or demarcation—we need to direct our attention to the founding of the Theosophical Society (1875), which, intriguingly, is near contemporaneous with the founding of the field of comparative religion, often dated to 1870 with Max Müller (Sharpe 1986, 35). Something more interesting is occurring here than mere coincidence. My argument will be that Theosophical knowledge, within the parameters of its comparative religion enterprise, is currently a marginal, subjugated, and peripheral body of work. I will argue that this process of marginalising began in the 1870s. The results of this process of rationalization in a wide variety of fields, and reflected in that of comparative religion, have become entrenched. It was in the late nineteenth century that the debates surrounding inclusion and exclusion, were played out, the results of which were solidified. It is since the 1960s and 1970s that these boundaries have been seriously questioned in a variety of sciences. The boundaries in the field of comparative religion have yet to be seriously challenged. It is this initial period of boundary marking that I challenge, with the goal of reassessing H. P. Blavatsky’s Theosophical enterprise in comparative religion. Before moving to this pivotal period, we might reflect one more warning from Foucault, who wrote,

What types of knowledge do you want to disqualify in the very instance of your demand: ‘Is it a science’? Which speaking, discoursing subjects – which subjects of experience and knowledge – do you want to ‘diminish’ when you say: ‘I who conduct this discourse am conducting a scientific discourse, and I am a scientist’?  
(1980, 85)

Yes, precisely, we shall see that almost no-one is innocent, and many claimed the authority of “Science.” I have earlier referred to three examples presented by Christopher M. Hutton and John E. Joseph, Egil Asprem, and Peter J. Bowler which hint at a possible reassessment of Theosophy. This type of re-evaluative process is already underway in the related fields of spiritualism and the occult sciences which have attracted more scholarly attention thus far. Roger Luckhurst makes the point eloquently in relation to telepathy when he writes,

One of the appeals of analysing ‘marginal sciences’ like Mesmerism and Spiritualism in the nineteenth century has been to question the assumptions behind demarcations of science and non-science, proper and improper knowledge. Part of the fascination of psychical research has been in coming to understand how it capitalized on the fissures of scientific naturalism, exploiting uncertainty and transition in knowledges and institutions of cultural authority. Telepathy was theorized at vanishing points – just where confident demarcations between truth and error, science and pseudo-science, could not at the time be determined. It seemed more promising to approach telepathy as if it were a *possible* formulation, at least for a certain time in the late Victorian period, and to treat the central figures in its emergence as if, as Steven Shapin puts it, ‘their “cognitive wiring” was in proper working order: that is to say, they are all possessed of “natural rationality.”’ (2002, 2)

Richard Noakes has made similar points in a number of his studies on spiritualism, as has Andreas Sommers. The range of responses to spiritualistic phenomena in the late nineteenth century reveals disputes over what were the correct scientific approaches to a subject, the place of authority in the sciences, and highlight the negotiation over the meaning of the categories invoked, for example, what were the legitimate boundaries of the “natural” or “supernatural” in relation to “science” (Noakes 2004; 2008; Sommers 2014). The received normative responses to these nineteenth-century debates have been challenged in the social sciences in the last three decades or so. I will locate my work within this stream of thinking through, in part, the work of Richard Rorty, whose pragmatic anti-essentialism allows for a rereading of past conflicts in theoretical ways other than that of a long march towards increasing truth and rationality.

My review of the boundary work of the late nineteenth century is in reference to two areas. The first, and primary boundary work, was that of the mainstream sciences as they began to define themselves. The second, relevant to my work, is that of the field of comparative religion. The Theosophical knowledge and perspective was found wanting on both fronts. Science, undoubtedly, was the elephant in the room and it certainly permeated H. P. Blavatsky’s works. For the purposes of my argument, Thomas F. Gieryn has done interesting work on science as a cultural space and the processes of definition that establishing an institution in any period entails. Gieryn’s work forms a link between Foucault and Rorty, between power and pragmatism. In his *Cultural Boundaries of Science*, Gieryn adopts the cartographic metaphor of “maps,” with a map for him being a “*form of representation*” (1999,

7).<sup>13</sup> For him, as for Rorty as we will see below, there can be no representation which is “true” to reality. Arguing for a pragmatic evaluation of science, he sees no point in evaluating the accuracy of its representations. Maps are contingent, limited, constructed, and mediating. Science is a “cultural space” with no ontological foundation. Gieryn argues that one needs to look for the success of science as discourse “downstream,” i.e. where it consumed in society. This links to Rorty’s social or communal justification and endorsement of specific claims. Gieryn offers a definition of boundary work, “the discursive attribution of selected qualities to scientists, scientific methods, and science claims for the purpose of drawing a rhetorical boundary between science and some less authoritative residual non-science (Gieryn 1999, 4). There are always contests and no single map is secure. Various participants will either claim or undermine, depending on the strategy, the assumed qualities of science which include, according to Gieryn, the following: objectivity, efficacy, precision, reliability, authenticity, predictability, sincerity, desirability, and tradition. Science as a category and enterprise is negotiated, and this negotiation is either more or less visible in any particular moment in history. Representations of science are mobilised in certain contexts for certain goals. There is no essential science or set of qualities one may call “scientific” which are trans-historical. There is also no convergence in science over time, no objective referent. Those who lose out in the struggle are marginalised with the title “science” being conferred on the winners. Gieryn summarises his own perspective on science by describing it as local, episodic, pragmatic, strategic, contingent, and constructed. His notion of science as cultural space and as the product of contingency, strategy, and negotiation removes the debate from what is true and what is false. The late nineteenth century was one such period of dramatic boundary work, not simply between true and false, good science and bad science, but between competing rational discourses whose places were in the process of being negotiated. Viewing science and science-making in this pragmatic perspective opens the field and allows for a re-description in the sense that marginalised voices can now be heard. This is part of my opening gambit, a challenge to existing narratives.

What am I aiming to accomplish? I am looking for a method of reviewing past debates, theories, and events without accepting any inherited hierarchical evaluative status imposed on them. I elaborate on my earlier endorsement of a theoretical relativism by highlighting the boundary work involved in the establishment of any “science.” Referencing comparative

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<sup>13</sup> An early article by Gieryn also highlights the pragmatic stances adopted by scientific naturalists to establish the centrality of their disciplinary perspective (1983, 781-95).

religion, one reason this is plausible is that no theory of the late nineteenth century has withstood the test of time. We must shed past valuations and begin a process of reassessment. We are, however, inheritors of past evaluative decisions; they form and define in many ways the field in which we work. They certainly define its standard histories. It would seem that these inherited characteristics, which may or may not be readily apparent in the field as it now stands, do still have a guiding momentum. I believe we need a way to break from this directing pulse, and Richard Rorty's pragmatic stance to knowledge and history does precisely this.<sup>14</sup> My interest in Rorty is not premised on his statements about religion. It is clear he had little sympathy for the topic. The use I have for his work is based on his assault on epistemology, his call to historicism, and the resulting holism.<sup>15</sup> While Rorty's positioning could, in my view, open almost any period in history, it has particular force in periods of conflict and conscious self-definition. Historical periods in which "knowledge" is being transformed, negotiated, valued, defined, or produced, and periods where a misplaced "certainty" is that which the present has cast back into the past, these periods are interrogated through his pragmatic perspective. The late nineteenth century, when comparative religion as a science was being born, is just such a period.

In his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1980), Richard Rorty begins to open space for the "conversational" approach he anticipates by breaking with contemporary epistemology. Specifically, he is engaged in an attempt to break with any theory of knowledge based on accurate representations. The process of representation is initiated by an encounter with an object which determines a belief. Knowledge is envisioned as the collection of accurate representations and the mirroring quality of the mind is such that under certain conditions a privileged collection of representations can be isolated. These privileged representations, which are self-evidently true, are the basis of the various theories (Rorty 1980, 163). This representational foundationalism, described by Rorty as the attempt to "mirror" nature, is indefensible. Whatever the mind may be, and whatever its powers may be, it does not have the ability to accurately represent the "world as it really is." Adopting an evolutionary

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<sup>14</sup> A pragmatic engagement with the study of religion has a lengthy history, from early expounders such as William James, John Dewey, and Charles Sanders Peirce through to Richard Rorty. Two notable recent contributions to the field are, Slater, Michael R. 2016. *Pragmatism and the Philosophy of Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, and Davis, G. Scott. 2012. *Believing and Acting: The Pragmatic Turn in Comparative Religion and Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. An article which specifically drew my attention to Rorty and Pragmatism was, Davis, G. Scott. 2009. "Richard Rorty and the Pragmatic turn in the study of religion." *Religion* 39: 69-82.

<sup>15</sup>For concise assessments of Richard Rorty and history see, Ankersmit, Frank. 2008. "Rorty and History." *New Literary History* 39:79-100, and Jenkins, Keith. 1995. *On 'What is History?': From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White*. London: Routledge.

vocabulary, Rorty wonders when the mind stopped coping with the world and started reflecting it. He strives to undermine what he sees as the founding ocular metaphor, and philosophical error, that the mind is a “mirror of nature,” and that the task of philosophy is to sift through the various representations and identify those which are true to the object. There are no privileged representations, and no amount of “cleansing the mirror of the mind” can uncover the real nature of the world. With this the “correspondence theory of truth” is revealed as being founded on metaphysical dualisms which cannot be sustained.

This stance invokes an anti-essentialism of universal character. There is nothing which is not contingent—not language, self, or community—and there is no stable centre on which to ground a theory of true knowledge (Rorty 1993, 3-69). Philosophy, experience, religious statements, and the natural sciences cannot offer a firm foundation on which to build a body of truths that are immune to revision. He rejects all ontological groundings, including notions of “God,” “Truth,” “Knowledge,” “History,” “Science,” “rationality,” “morality,” “method,” and so on. There is no “bird’s eye view” outside of the system from which statements can be judged. We cannot step outside of our vocabularies to assess propositions for their truthfulness to the world as it is.

From this anti-essentialist premise Rorty proposes a distinction between truth and justification. He wants to drop any talk of the “truth” as some achievable, self-evident goal, one which all humanity agrees to due to a compulsion from outside of the person. He makes a distinction between the “world being out there” and the “truth being out there” (Rorty 1993, 4-5). Truth, he argues, is a property of linguistic entities, or sentences, and without sentences there are no truths. Language itself is a human creation, subject to change and amendment, and truth cannot be located there. He writes,

We can think of knowledge as a relation to propositions, and thus of justification as a relation between the propositions in question and other propositions from which the former may be informed. Or we may think of both knowledge and justification as privileged relations to the objects those propositions are about. (1980, 159)

Rorty argues for the former position. In the place of accurate representations of the “nature of things” in the mind, he proposes the notion of “justification.” “Justification” he notes is “not a matter of a special relation between ideas (or words) and objects, but of conversation, of social practice” (Rorty 1980, 170). Jeffrey Stout elaborates on the distinction between truth and justification, noting how they “swing free” of each other. One may have epistemic



justification for one's beliefs even though they may not turn out to be true. Justification is a historically and culturally contextualised process. Alternately, one may hold a belief which turns out to be true even though we have no supporting reasons to hold that belief (Stout 2002, 27-31). We enter a linguistic community and learn a particular vocabulary, and it is in consequence of these events that flow our knowledge, awareness, concepts, language, inference, and justification (Rorty 1980, 187). Justification is, therefore, contextual and historical, rooted in the society in which one lives. There is no need, or possibility, to ground knowledge in empirical or ontological foundations. Knowledge is what a community allows one to say, and is a matter of social practice. In short, Rorty argues that "truth" (knowledge) is made rather than found. This is the destructive aspect of Rorty's pragmatism, his critique of accepted positions, and this is the part most relevant to the current study. In *Philosophy and Social Hope*, and throughout his writings, he works to move away from distinctions such as found/made, discovery/invention, and objective/subjective (1999, xvii-xviii). His real aim is to shift the conversation to notions of "use," as it relates to various ends by different communities. I will at the end engage with this aspect of pragmatism by presenting a short argument for the purpose and use of theories of religion.

This constructivist position is a powerful antidote to a wide variety of foundational positions in the late nineteenth century, in particular those of the sciences, but including those of the Theosophical Society. A consequence of this is that knowledge is holistic, coherent, and narrative in nature. For Rorty,

A thoroughgoing holism has no place for the notion of philosophy as "conceptual," as "apodictic," as picking out the "foundations" of the rest of knowledge, as explaining which representations are "purely given" or "purely conceptual," as presenting a "canonical notation" rather than an empirical discovery, or as isolating "trans-framework heuristic categories." If we see knowledge as a matter of conversation and of social practice, rather than as an attempt to mirror nature, we will not be likely to envisage a metapractice which will be the critique of all possible forms of social practice. (1980, 170-71)

The consequences of Rorty's pragmatism are many. The desired actor in society is the liberal ironist, liberal in that cruelty is to be avoided, and ironist in the sense that the agent accepts the contingency of everything (1993, xv). While pragmatism implies a rejection of both religious faith and Enlightenment rationalism, it does not theoretically privilege naturalistic methodologies and explanations (Blum 2011, 83). Pragmatism allows for a methodological

pluralism, with a strong historicist and nominalistic perspective. For example, a society in which there were no naturalistic explanations of the world, invoking instead metaphysical explanations, cannot be said to be less in touch with the world than later societies in which naturalistic theories dominate. The historical contextualising of knowledge, and the notion of knowledge as justified true belief, in which the community is the only possible deciding authority, does not allow for judgements based on ontological foundations. It also will not allow for deep comparisons of the present with the past and misguided conceptions of increasing rationality, progress, or advance in knowledge.

We are born into a linguistic community, with a vocabulary to be learnt, which in turn informs the debates and questions possible. We are also trained into various communities with their specific vocabularies, for example, the natural sciences, religious groupings, philosophical clubs, and so on. These vocabularies are, for Rorty, attempts put forward by human beings to cope with the world, they are therapeutic and edifying. There is a “potential infinity of vocabularies in which the world can be described,” and this pluralism allows for the “conversation” to continue (1980, 367). Instead of assuming we have hit the solid ground of reality, pragmatism allows the past and the periphery to speak and be heard—if we only allow them. A controversial implication of this is that the Western scientific enterprise is simply another vocabulary, and should not be viewed as the foundation of all other knowledge or as representing reality as it is. Science is a value based enterprise and its value lies in the communal agreement that predicting and controlling nature in order to reduce suffering is the goal worthy of aiming for. Science is not the paradigm of objectivity, commonsense, rationality, or of methodologically neutral investigation. Science is simply the best means humanity has evolved for controlling and coping with the world. Alexander Kremer, quoting Rorty in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, makes this clear,

On this view, to say that a belief is, as far as we know, true, is to say that no alternative belief is, as far as we know, a better habit of acting. When we say that our ancestors believed, falsely, that the sun went around the earth, and that we believe, truly, that the earth goes around the sun, we are saying that we have a better tool than our ancestors did. Our ancestors might rejoin that their tool enabled them to believe in the literal truth of the Christian Scriptures, whereas ours does not. Our reply has to be, I think, that the benefits of modern astronomy and space travel outweigh the advantages of Christian fundamentalism. The argument between us and our medieval ancestors should not be about which of us has got the universe right. It should be

about the point of holding views about the motion of heavenly bodies, the ends to be achieved by use of certain tools. Confirming the truth of Scripture is one such aim, space travel is another. (Kremer 2010, 328; Rorty 1999, xxv)

Rorty rejects religious doctrines and teachings, not on any point of truth to reality or ontological foundations, which for him are not assessable by their own commitments. He acknowledges that his endorsement of liberal democracy and the scientific endeavour are not based on a-historical factors, but on contingent pressures which can change as society changes. He is simply thankful that humanity has decided one way instead of another (1980, 330-1).

This stance has led to charges of relativism against him, though he has sufficiently defended himself against the most telling consequences of the claims (Rorty 1991, 23; Rorty 1999, xvi-xxxii; Tartaglia 2007, 210-6; Tartaglia 2012, 284-301). Rorty notes that charges of relativism trade on ontological dualisms, vocabulary he wants to drop in favour of a vocabulary of *use* or *purpose*. His endorsement of Donald Davidson's criticism of the scheme-content distinction ensures that human beings are always in contact with the world and always speaking about the world (Davidson 1973-74, 8, 20). Linked to Davidson's principle of charity, which argues that we are mostly correct in our views, this ensures that an empty relativism is refuted. Relativism, when actually presented, is to be rejected as unsustainable, but only once it has done its work as a part of a broader strategy. We need to reread the past without adherence to the normative narratives we have inherited. This is not so we can find "the truth," but rather to present more useful norms. Useful for what purpose? For whom? I propose norms useful for explaining our own human behaviour to ourselves.

Of direct importance to my argument is the distinction Rorty draws between normal and abnormal discourse and between normal and revolutionary science, resulting in a "re-contextualising," and how this relates to "facts" and "objects." Normal science and normal discourse are those sciences and discourses about which everyone in a given society knows the rules. They are the accepted norms of a given society. Abnormal science and discourse are those novel presentations that challenge the normal and accepted way of doing and seeing things. These new irruptions can go two ways: they can be viewed either as "odd" and be rejected, or they can be viewed as "odd" but eventually become the new standard of a society. The latter process involves a re-description and re-contextualising of "facts" and "objects." A new description can involve a new vocabulary and language, entailing the dropping of old

vocabularies (and metaphors) and the issues inherent in them. (For example, Rorty's dropping of the "mirror of nature" metaphor releases one from questions of representation). Rorty sees contexts divided into two: firstly, as "a new set of attitudes toward some of the sentences previously in one's repertoire" and secondly, as "the acquisition of attitudes toward new truth-value candidates, sentences towards which one had previously had no attitudes" (Rorty 1991, 94). Rorty is keen to the error of separating fact or object from description or theory. There is no fact or object independent of context. There can only be a re-contextualising of something already contextualised, something already described. There are no self-consistent facts or objects which impose themselves on the mind. Furthermore, there is no privileged context in Rorty's pragmatism, there is only what society has accepted and will accept, which he hopes will be an ongoing conversation between all possible participants. If there is no privileged context, is there a limit to legitimate or justifiable contextual readings? I see a link here with Derrida's free "play" in his "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (2005). What can arrest the play of signification once we swing free of the stabilising and balancing centre, be it, "essence, existence, substance, subject, *alētheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth" (Derrida 2005, 353)? Can one position be more highly valued than another? If it can, what criteria could be used? Rorty's criticism of epistemology, Derrida's criticism of presence/transcendental signified, and Foucault's suspicion of claims to being "scientific" reveal something else at work, for example, power or desire. Derrida writes, "The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely" (2005, 354). For Rorty there is no final vocabulary, no limit to the possibilities for re-description and re-contextualising.<sup>16</sup>

When something new appears in a society (Rorty's example is the debate between Cardinal Bellarmine and Galileo) there is no way to appeal to the "facts," to "rationality," to "objective reality," or any other metaphysical presence to decide which is correct.<sup>17</sup> The "world" does not impose itself unambiguously on the human mind. Theories and descriptions can only be judged for the purposes they serve, and the community decides what purposes it values. Periods of revolutionary science, and the processes of rejection and transformation, happen

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<sup>16</sup> Rorty himself has announced his preference for liberal democracy, naturalistic explanations, and increasing societal happiness, though he concedes there is no way of grounding these preferences in any theory of truth.

<sup>17</sup> For an interesting example of this style of historiography see Hasok Chang on the reception and rejection of Phlogiston. Chang, Hasok. 2010. "The Hidden History of Phlogiston: How Philosophical Failure can generate Historiographical Refinement." *Hyle – International Journal for Philosophy of Chemistry* 16: 47-79.

continuously. Of relevance to my argument is the place of spiritualism and the “occult sciences” (telepathy, mesmerism, psychometry, etc.) in the late nineteenth century. While these, like Theosophy, have been either rejected or transformed into some new form, during the initial period of negotiation and disciplining there is no possible appeal which can *a priori* reject these new descriptions and events. The general stance towards these “fringe” positions can be described as evaluating them as pseudo-scientific, amateurish and irrational. This has, however, been under revision, as I have briefly discussed above. Emergent positions are not intrinsically “irrational” or examples of Tylorian “survivals,” they are so designated by the participants and the community. There is, however, a period of assessment, of evaluation, and of counter-disciplining during which time positions are being negotiated and created. Theosophy, with its comparative religion, emerged during one such period – the late nineteenth century. I argue that spiritualism and its related material phenomena, for example, the séance phenomena and other “occult sciences,” were sufficiently challenging to the dominant naturalistic discourse of science that the scientific engagement with them can be regarded as instances of Rortyan revolutionary sciences or discourses. That society eventually rejected or transformed these forms of knowledge and scientific engagement is an historical fact, one which was under debate in the nineteenth century. While these debates raged, and various fields were being rationalized, the emergent knowledge became the foundation for a Theosophical comparative religion. This historical placing of Theosophy and its linking to science, emergent (potential) science, and what are now subjugated forms of knowledge rejected by mainstream cultural engines of knowledge, forces a re-evaluation of the enterprise of Theosophical comparative religion.

In his *Philosophy as Cultural Practice*, Richard Rorty brings into relief many of the issues involved. Discussing the distinction between private and public religion, he writes,

As I see it, the question of whether to keep on talking about God, whether to keep that logical space open, needs to be divided into two sub-questions. The first is a question about an individual’s right to be religious, even though unable to justify her religious beliefs to others. It might be formulated in the first person as “have I the right to my religious devotions even though there is no social practice that legitimizes inferences from or to sentences that I employ in this devotional practice – a lack which makes it impossible for many, and perhaps all, of my fellow-humans to make sense of this practice?” (2007, 25)

There is something at stake here. Nicholas Wolterstorff's critique of Rorty's public/private binary highlights the concern (Wolterstorff 2003, 131-33).<sup>18</sup> He thinks Rorty contradicts himself when he suggests that religion must earn its way into public debates. Rorty's philosophy may not privilege naturalism and evolution ontologically, but he has rooted his position in these perspectives. Wolterstorff is wrong on this point. Knowledge must show itself as useful and justified, otherwise we will end up with the following type of unsatisfactory statement. Discussing H. P. Blavatsky, Kocku von Stuckrad writes, "On the one hand, we have no reason to doubt that Blavatsky possessed mediumistic powers, which could have played a certain role in the creation of her major works" (Stuckrad 2014, 98). "On the other hand," Stuckrad notes that "there is almost nothing in *Isis Unveiled* that could not have been gathered from contemporary literature" (2014, 98). "We," read here academic scholars of the twenty-first century, have every reason to doubt H. P. Blavatsky's supernatural powers, and almost no reason to affirm them. What current field of knowledge endorses anything like H. P. Blavatsky's occult claims? I will argue that H. P. Blavatsky and her contemporaries had every reason to believe in certain powers of the mind, but *we* must offer naturalistic explanations of what she was doing and claiming.

It is the community, the social body, which decides what is religious, what is scientific, what is legitimate, and what qualifies as "making sense." For "God" replace spiritualism and the various occult sciences. Once these are contextualised in the late nineteenth century, and read through a pragmatic anti-essentialism, I argue that many of the received assumptions of the present are sufficiently challenged to demand a re-reading of comparative religion during that period. It is not that any effort of the past is to be removed from history, rather, it is a call for a re-description of the field to include forgotten endeavours.

The anti-representational trend I have outlined with Rorty, and more briefly in respect to science with Gieryn, has developed in the field of history. Which is not to say there are no competing trends—there are—and this is, in a sense, the point. We should not essentialise any field of academic study to the point that it cannot be challenged. Instead, a multiplicity of voices is to be encouraged. Alun Munslow has consolidated the ideas of theorists such as Hayden White, F. R. Ankersmit, Gérard Genette, and many others into what he calls a

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<sup>18</sup> See also Slater, Michael R. 2014. *Pragmatism and the Philosophy of Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, for an attempt to present an anti-naturalistic pragmatic based defence of a version of metaphysical realism.

narrative-linguistic theory of history, or a “deconstructive history” (2003, 1-23).<sup>19</sup> Munslow is at pains to show that history is not about finding the “real” or “objective” past. He emphasises the role of the situated author-historian as the producer of narratives and meanings, who plays as much a role in history generation as any particular activity, for example, consulting source documents or using theoretical methodologies to unlock the past. Once the break is made with epistemological foundationalism and accurate representation, once we accept that history is not underpinned by a correspondence theory of truth, we enter the realm of narrative and storytelling. With the rejection of foundational epistemology go associated normative ideals, such as universal rationality, decontextualised objectivity, the distinction between subject and object, and between historian and object of study. The situated historian now assumes a central place in the imposition of meaning on the past through processes of selection, voice, focalisation, and story space negotiation (Munslow 2007, 44-63; Munslow 2010, 153-60). My own selection of H. P. Blavatsky as the subject of focalisation has clearly affected the story I am weaving, as I view the debates through my reading of her writings. Embracing a semantic holism Munslow continues that while individual sentences may have propositional value, there are no “brute facts” or “raw materials” which determine their own meaning. Individual facts or statements are always already part of a larger discourse and never stand free from contextualising conditions. In addition, the binding of individual sentences about the past into a meaningful narrative is a complex process undertaken by the historian, and is not something imposed by the past on the historian. In a powerful passage Munslow writes,

Many historians still find it difficult to accept three particular corollaries of the narrative-linguistic position of the new history. First, the emplotment does not pre-exist in the evidence. Second, the logic of inference (explanation via induction and deduction and the assigning of knowable intentionality) is secondary to the figurative capture and representation of the content of the past. And finally that a moral judgement is crucial to how we provide a meaning for it. In other words, that the metaphoric form which results from the exercise of the historian’s imagination in which they first secure the past by choosing a period, a theme, a problem, an event, an intention, the wish to ‘know things about’ and their ‘meaning’, has a powerful pre-shaping authority over our historical knowledge, its interpretation and, therefore, the final meaning we ‘find’. (2003, 152)

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<sup>19</sup> Representative works by Alun Munslow include; 2007. *Narrative and History*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan; 2010. *The Future of History*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan; and 2003. *The New History*. Harlow: Pearson Longman.

The importance of, for example, a story space can be illustrated by reference to Alex Owen's *The Place of Enchantment* (2007). Owen is working with the period between 1880 and 1914 (2007, 7). Among the many movements discussed, the Theosophical Society is an important participant in her narrative. The years 1880 to 1914, however, do not conform to any internal developments in the Society. The first/second generation split, well accepted in Theosophical studies, does not map onto her dates. H. P. Blavatsky passed away in 1891, and any discussion of her historical contextualising cannot exceed that limit. That the Society existed beyond her death is obvious; however, it did not exist in the same way, or in the same larger cultural and intellectual environment. Munslow further notes,

What this means is that the historian has to create a narrative in which he or she composes their preferred list of propositional factual statements (from the millions available to them) *in a particular way*.

The issue is how such descriptive statements (the facts) or others that are constituted by one historian's 'reading' of the archive, are ordered and 'put together' through the mechanisms of emplotment, argument, use of concepts and ethical judgements to form a coherent and plausible structure of historical interpretation of the events to which they refer. (2003, 162)

These passages reinforce the notion that history telling is not a closed enterprise, but one open to new readings, new descriptions, and new meaning. We see this on a practical level in many instances of contemporary history work, for example, spiritualism and the "occult sciences" have been presented in continuum from being "irrational" to being seen as "emergent sciences." This is not a license for irresponsible free reign as narratives must be defended and presented to society at large. Munslow too acknowledges the need for a "responsible relativism," rooted in epistemological scepticism and under-determinism, which enables creative histories to be written (2007, 121-2; 2010, 4, 64-5). The capacity, however, for re-description and for historians to recontextualise the past is both broad and inspiring.

### 7.3) Challenging Binaries

Rooted in the above-detailed theoretical positions my reading of H. P. Blavatsky's work as an enterprise in comparative religion will question certain inherited binaries. These include professional/amateur scholarship, mainstream/periphery, science of religion/theology,



religious studies/religion, exoteric/esoteric, outsider/insider, and rational/irrational.<sup>20</sup> Nineteenth-century spiritualism challenges many of these binaries, as does, I propose, Theosophy (Stolow 2008, 673). The hierarchical valorising of one half of a binary can function on a political level to dominate the other. Binaries can reflect the process of self-definition, of rationalisation, and a separating of something valued from another. Binaries, therefore, are invoked and are not found, and can reflect problematic teleological impulses.

Any privileging of ideas, theories, and methodologies is open to suspicion. We must, however, remain alert to the fact that power is not exercised in a unidirectional manner. All sides in a struggle adopt positions and assert themselves from the options available within the entire field. The politics of power involved in the drawing of boundaries says less about the objective value of any position than it does about the unfolding of a discourse field. Pragmatism has freed us from accepting any particular perspective as “true” in the sense of corresponding to “reality as it is.” The replacing of this with the notion of narrative construction and use reconceptualises the debate away from hard and fast distinctions to a more perspectival position. Once the implication of this freedom is grasped, new readings of the past become possible. The late nineteenth century is a period of determined boundary marking in a wide variety of fields, and is open to rereading for this very reason.

Three illustrations might be cited. Firstly, Jonathan Z. Smith reminds us of the politics at play in the distinction between the “academic” study of religion and “being religious” (Smith 2014, 462). By “being religious” I include a number of things, including comparative theology, theology itself, and being an active member of a particular tradition – activities based on the foundation of a particular religious tradition. We cannot simply erase the distinction because while both sides are doing the same thing, studying religion, they do so from different founding assumptions (Flood 1999, 226; MacKendrick 1999, 77-83). Pragmatism frees one from any “essentialist” or “foundational” rejection of a particular perspective. In terms of content, or propositional statement, there can be no simple rejection of “religious” positions, there are only justifiable choices. We are no longer looking for the “truth” of a situation in relation to reality, but, rather, what is justifiable in an historical period (Kremer 2010, 328-9). This is where my work is situated. I am looking to re-examine these dichotomies in a particular period.

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<sup>20</sup>On the latter, referring to Blavatsky’s works, Lubelsky cautions of the “irrational character of these writings, as well as their credibility” (2012, 118). Many of these distinctions are already challenged in the field, if not specifically in relation to Theosophy. For example, on challenging the notion of an insider/outsider “problem” see Gardiner and Engler (2012) and Jeppe Sinding Jensen (2011).

We might expand this by investigating the nature of scholarship within the Theosophical stream as opposed to that in the academic community. Is serious research into religions being carried out within the Theosophical tradition? I have suggested that earlier Theosophical oriented scholars such as G. R. S. Mead and a contemporary scholar such as David Reigle do meet the requisite standards. I also have here in mind a specific accusation levelled at H. P. Blavatsky by Max Müller in his journal discussion with the influential early Theosophist, A. P. Sinnett. Max Müller notes in reference to Blavatsky's "esoteric Buddhism" that, "No one can study Buddhism unless he learns Sanskrit and Pâli, so as to be able to read the canonical books, and at all events spell the names correctly" (1901, 107). This position can be problematical in a number of ways. Max Müller, in his comparative works at the very least, cannot surely have claimed familiarity with the language of every sacred scriptural reference he discussed. Chidester has, for example, revealed his reliance on compromised and problematic works on Southern African religion (2014, 59-89). Perhaps most tellingly, Max Müller used this same defence against Andrew Lang in their disputes. Lang was also no Sanskritist, but quite clearly was an important figure in the history of comparative religion (Dorson 1955, 399). Another example is that of Sir John Lubbock who is included in studies of comparative religion (Chidester 2014, 96; Sharpe 1986, 51-53). Lubbock, however, had no university qualifications behind him. What is the rationale for including Lubbock, but excluding G. R. S. Mead or H. P. Blavatsky? It could be that Lubbock endorsed the fashionable, dominant line and Mead did not.

Secondly, in his important study, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, Joscelyn Godwin remarks, "The time of the gentleman amateur was passing" (Godwin 1994, 311). He suggests that as the fields of Asian studies and comparative mythology became increasingly specialised it became difficult for a single person to encompass the entire range of data into a single theory. It was left to occultists or esotericists, who could claim special knowledge, to speculate in this manner. I am not certain one could entirely agree with Godwin on this issue. As exemplified by Herbert Spencer's *A System of Synthetic Philosophy*, totalizing theories were the hallmark of the field of comparative religion. In a sense, any explanatory theory is comprehensive in scope. The beginning of a separation between specialist and amateur should be questioned in the light of the history of comparative religious theories, and of the methodological pluralism that pragmatism allows. It is not, obviously, my intent to say illogical or unreflective opinions are equal to well-thought-out and thoroughly researched perspectives. I am suggesting that the latter are not confined to an academic environment,

though they may well predominate there. Terms such as “irrational,” “illogical,” and “amateur,” in many instances reflect boundary work which demands critical scrutiny.

A third, pertinent instance of the effects of boundary marking is highlighted by Jeremy Naydler in his *Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts* (2005), a book based on his PhD. His outlining of the formation of the academic discipline of Egyptology highlights the deliberate exclusion of “esoteric” perspectives and content, for example, mysteries or shamanistic practices, from the academic field.<sup>21</sup> Though not entirely undisputed, these exclusions exist to this day in the field. A specific example of exclusion is whether the Egyptian books of the afterlife were used by living individuals, or, were intended solely for the use of the deceased.

We realise that both sides of a binary may be mobilized by the participants as part of their manoeuvres to appropriate authority and establish their perspectives. Participants are not simply consigned to an “esoteric” category; they may actively locate themselves as esotericists for polemical reasons of their own. It is my intent to question this distinction through the examination of an esoteric position: that of H. P. Blavatsky. Bergunder argues that “esotericism” can profitably be seen as an empty signifier, and as such there is no set content which differentiates an exoteric from an esoteric statement (Bergunder 2010, 20-4). There is no essential, a-historic esoteric position, and the content of a particular statement cannot, therefore, place a person in any conclusive way. I will argue that there is little in the Theosophical position, in relation to comparative religion, that from a different point of view could not be part of mainstream discussions in this field. I wish to make it clear that I am not simply arguing that H. P. Blavatsky’s works are internally coherent, and that her conclusions make sense within the bounds of her own Theosophical endeavour. I am also not arguing that sheer relativism justifies any perspective, and hence hers must be included. I am, instead, proposing that she made fair use of the general resources available to her in the late nineteenth century. That she made truth claims, selections, decisions, inclusions, and exclusions should go without saying. In these practices, however, she differed in no appreciable way from other actors in the same period, and from what theorists continue to do

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<sup>21</sup> This reflects the “rejected knowledge” thesis of Wouter J. Hanegraaff in his *Esotericism and the Academy* (2013). With Michael Bergunder, however, I question the explanatory value of this perspective and, instead of multiplying binary distinctions such as accepted/rejected, prefer to shift the focus on how participants made use of the material at hand. (Bergunder 2010, 18). It might be noted that if I can successfully write H. P. Blavatsky into the history of comparative religion as a legitimate participant I will have challenged Hanegraaff’s general thesis, at least in this instance.

to this day.<sup>22</sup> I am also not suggesting that Blavatsky be incorporated into the debate by being given a Theosophical (read here Theological) seat. Though justifiable, this is insufficiently revisionist. My position is that she was working sufficiently within the paradigms of larger discourses, particularly the sciences, to avoid her work being designated as “theology” in any simplistic manner. My thesis will rest on the acceptance of the re-description of spiritualist and occult sciences as “emergent” sciences instead of marginalised delusions. Inherent in this position is that history always reveals a range of responses to any issue as it unfolds. Retrospectively one position may win out and the losers of the debate will be re-described in unflattering terms – irrational, subjective, ignorant, amateur, and so on.

#### 7.4) Examining the Hermeneutic Method of H. P. Blavatsky

My work will identify various tools utilised by H. P. Blavatsky in her interpretive endeavour. These would include such devices as analogy, symbol interpretation, allegory, geometric keys, and any number of such interpretive mechanisms. A predicament arises at this point for the contemporary scholar. Either one accepts Blavatsky’s explanation for the origin of her system or one imposes one’s own on her. In essence, while I might record that Blavatsky claims to have learnt the parameters of the Theosophical teachings from *mahatmas* and lost esoteric records, I must present a different explanation for the origin of her system. I set aside then the Theosophical discourse of the ancient wisdom tradition and its carriers, and regard Blavatsky as the originator and builder of the Theosophical system (which is not to argue there were no other actors involved in the production.) Siv Ellen Kraft has raised many of these issues in her article “To Mix or not to Mix” (2002). This article, so reasonable in a certain light, betrays in my reading a failure of nerve. Kraft is caught between an inherited scholarly view of Theosophy as being beyond the academic pale and the inherently reasonable nature of the work. So often can Kraft suggest that Theosophy mirrors scholarly works and concerns, so often can Kraft suggest that academics of the era had the same impulses and failings that the works of H. P. Blavatsky seem to display. Yet, despite this, she can still separate Theosophical comparative religion from its more mainstream version. She

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<sup>22</sup>On the idea of a de-contextualised narrative selection David Chidester, referring to the “imperial comparative religion,” argues that, “Second, by contrast, imperial comparative religion, as practiced in European metropolitan centers from the 1850s into the twentieth century, showed no concern with religions as coherent, integrated systems. Rather, theorists in Europe, especially during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, arranged disparate evidence from all over the world into a single, uniform temporal sequence, from primitive to civilized, that claimed to represent the universal history of humanity” (1996, 3).

notes Blavatsky's inadequate philological skills, her reliance on *mahatmas* for information, and her lack of procedure according to "academic methods of interpretation" (2002, 154). The second of these I reject outright, as there can be no Theosophical *mahatmas* in the current academic world and H. P. Blavatsky cannot, therefore, have actually met them. The first and the third objections I would argue could be applied to any number of mainstream scholars, and that they presuppose a value in these activities which, in fact, may not exist. In specific reference to the third shortcoming, I am thinking of notions of the arbitrary selection of data and of the de-contextualising of data. Pragmatically, no method assures us of anything like the certainty assumed by many nineteenth century actors. Witness Kraft's summing up of H. P. Blavatsky's strategies: some material is just adopted as it coheres with her opinions; contradictory material is either discarded or interpreted to "fit" her scheme; and there is appeal to an inner, esoteric meaning, the original intent of the text and author (2002, 157). She notes that Blavatsky's method ignores the "religio-cultural context" of the data (2002, 157). I would suggest that these interpretive manoeuvres characterise much academic scholarship. Kraft picks up on Hanegraaff's opinion that H. P. Blavatsky's Theosophy is "an example of Comparative Religion on occultist premises," but fails to detail what those premises might be, or how they differ from others' premises (2002, 152). Kraft is caught between Theosophy as a religion, a "religio-scientific" mixture, a "spiritual science," and a "scientific spirituality" (2002, 143, 156). Perhaps, Blavatsky's Theosophical work challenges the usefulness of these distinctions and categories. Such is my argument.

H. P. Blavatsky's writings give the impression that she is searching for something in religious texts, the ancient wisdom tradition. We might think in terms of metaphors such as "injecting/inserting" or "uncovering." In the former, the Theosophical system is imposed on the data, in the latter the Theosophical system actually inheres in the data in some manner. While both movements are at play in her work in particular instances, in general, sympathisers might argue that she felt she was finding something (i.e. revealing something which is really there), while academics might feel she is inserting something foreign to the texts and traditions. With Rorty, however, I suggest the debate be shifted away from "finding" or "making," and towards her "use" of the materials at hand. I ask myself, what is guiding this process? What consolidating praxis is behind Blavatsky's selections? I would like to propose a possible answer to this question. It is my position that this answer justifies much of H. P. Blavatsky's work, a justification based on the very processes of science which

she supposedly transgressed.<sup>23</sup> Justification works on two levels, that of method (organising epistemic code) and that of statement. I will examine both.

An examination of H. P. Blavatsky's writings as efforts in comparative religion is the central focus of my thesis. In later chapters I will reference individual interpretive methods while here I propose the guiding principle which informs her work. It is important to note that this does not explain why she chose this particular vision of religion as opposed to any other. Confronted with the same context and data another person may well move in a different direction – we cannot hope to find mechanical causation. Jonathan Z. Smith presents four modes or styles of comparison, the ethnographic, the encyclopaedic, the morphological, and the evolutionary (Smith 1971, 71). Specifically, the morphological method can be identified in H. P. Blavatsky's works, most elaborately in her magnum opus *The Secret Doctrine*, but originally in *Isis Unveiled*. Illuminatingly, Smith notes, "The rise of the 'science' of Comparative Religions cannot be separated from nineteenth-century scientific thought in general" (Smith 1971, 81). He goes on to mention specifically the importance of comparative anatomy and Goethe's search for the *Urpflanze* in comparative botany. We could add here the European search for the original perfect language, the *Ursprache* (Eco 1997; Olender 1992, 1-3). Goethe's original form or prototype was an intellectual idea, a heuristic ideal based on inductive observation, and not an historical ancestor. Eric Csapo and Angus Nicholls elaborate on the development of this comparative theme in the study of religion and mythology. Both identify the diachronic search for an *urform*, a result of deductive reasoning, as a basic value in the nineteenth century engagement with these fields. Csapo, discussing specifically myths notes, "the comparatist Urmyth is an actual historical entity which is identified as the cause of all derivative myths" (Csapo 2005, 182, 203; Nicholls 2015, 220-4). What is it about these comparative fields that influenced religious studies? Beyond individuals who straddled both fields, an underlying epistemic base has been identified.

Daston and Galison's *Objectivity* (2007) traces the emergence of objectivity in the sciences from the nineteenth century to the present. They present three epistemic regimes, "truth-to-

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<sup>23</sup> As I lack the space to discuss it in detail, I must make brief reference to a recent competing contribution to the study of H. P. Blavatsky's hermeneutic method. While I find much to disagree with, J. Barton Scott presents a coherent and explanatory theory of her interpretive stance. Focusing on her comparative religion, both Scott and I attempt to explain the same characteristics in her writings, though we do so differently. Scott points to Blavatsky's "erasing," "effacing," "negating," "cancelling," and "renouncing" of "particularities," in both religions and their texts (2016, 199-204). She is looking for the universal "truth" behind individual religions and "peels" back the husk to reveal the "universal secret." Scott's underlying explanatory mechanisms include a textual "asceticism," an "allegorical renunciation," and anticlericalism. As I will outline in this section, my underlying explanatory mechanism is Daston and Galison's "truth-to-nature" epistemic code.

nature,” “mechanical objectivity,” and “trained judgement.” Each orientation is tied to different conceptions of the self, and each has different epistemic virtues and dangers. Mechanical objectivity, exemplified by the use of the camera and photography, aims to capture the particularities of nature. The move here is to attempt to capture nature as it really is, without any imposition of the scientist affecting what is there. Trained judgement revolves around the “expert” who is trained to interpret an image, that is, to see what is valuable in what is captured in the image. It is, however, their “truth-to-nature” epistemic code which I propose underlies Theosophical typological thinking. These three epistemic codes existed in various observational sciences and examples mentioned include anatomy, botany, mineralogy, zoology, and palaeontology (Daston and Galison 2007, 60). These three codes, while building on each other serially (truth-to-nature, mechanical objectivity, trained judgement), never actually fully replace one another, and exist side by side (2007, 28). Daston and Galison produce the following diagram,

Epistemic virtue	Truth-to-nature	Mechanical objectivity	Trained judgement
Persona	Sage	Worker	Expert
Image	Reasoned	Mechanical	Interpreted
Practice	Selection / Synthesis	Automated transfer	Pattern recognition
Ontology	Universals	Particular	Families

(2007, 371).

Two examples of the truth-to-nature regime given for this underlying orientation of science are from botanical atlases and fluid dynamics in the mid to late nineteenth century (up to 1895 at least). Botanical atlases were produced showing “ideal” leaves of various plants. Researchers did not present any one particular leaf as it actually appeared in nature. Any “errors” and contingencies of nature were erased by the artist to present nature as it was meant to be. A similar activity is noted with certain experimenters in fluid dynamics. One scientist recorded the effects of a drop of milk or water falling into a pool of the same liquid. While thousands of non-ideal splashes were recorded, they published and worked with only the ideal ones (2007, 11). They corrected nature and rejected “errors” in the natural world. The underlying methodology which replaced this was “mechanical objectivity” – represented in part by the camera’s attention to individual details (Daston and Galison 2007, 55-113). The truth-to-nature epistemic code is characterised by the following ideas – ideal, typical,

characteristic, and average – and evokes notions of the original type or archetype. It seeks the essence and the perfect form of specific phenomena and is enacted through selection, comparison, and generalization (2007, 42, 69, 59, 70). In this mode, the scientist, who has reviewed thousands of examples, corrects the imperfections in nature by seeing the underlying structure intended by nature. Referring to atlas makers and the artists involved, Daston and Galison note, “For naturalists who sought truth-to-nature, a faithful image was emphatically not one that depicted exactly what was seen. Rather, it was a reasoned image, achieved by the imposition of reason upon sensation and imagination *and* by the imposition of the naturalist’s will upon the eyes and hands of the artist” (2007, 98). I argue that this search for the underlying unity of types is the guiding principle in H. P. Blavatsky’s comparative religion. There is a structural homology with the Theosophical orientation, and the idea of the “sage” with the emphasis on “universals” is suggestive. Her link, possibly unconscious, to the scientific world was at an epistemic level. It is not a causal link I aim to present; it is an interpretive or explanatory link. Truth-to-nature was one option that was open to her, the other being that of mechanical objectivity. The various codes in play would necessitate different positions, in part explaining some of the arguments of the time. As some scholars of religion turned towards the specificity and uniqueness of differing religions (mechanical objectivity), others, like H. P. Blavatsky, retained an interest in truth-to-nature codes.

In H. P. Blavatsky’s Theosophical endeavour in comparative religion, I read the Theosophical teachings as an intrinsic component of the method itself. That is, the Theosophical doctrines are the parameters of the ideal type of religion. Theosophy attempts to recapture the first, the primal, and the original religion. All later religions are only partial reflections, degenerated forms, and distorted versions of this complete pattern. The Theosophical doctrines themselves are the template against which all traditions are measured. The original pattern is, then, represented by the Theosophical system itself, and individual teachings are fillers on the map or grid of Theosophy. The organizing structure in one sense takes precedence over the actual content, though the shape and content form an indivisible whole. It is my intention to examine the content, the specific statements made, and to assess them for justifiability in the late nineteenth century. I ask then, in what way was H. P. Blavatsky’s organisation of nineteenth-century knowledge justifiable?

H. P. Blavatsky’s hermeneutic depends on the status of her Theosophical statement. This statement evolved over time. In *Isis Unveiled* we see little of the mature language of



Theosophy contained in *The Secret Doctrine*. Blavatsky's mature Theosophy is contained in a number of terms, expressions, and patterns – a “Theosophical vocabulary” – which was not developed in *Isis Unveiled*. This developed, mature Theosophical vocabulary includes terms and concepts such as the One Life, root-races, rounds, the logoi, seven principles, *jivatman*, *parabrahman*, planetary chains, and many more.<sup>24</sup> This mature Theosophy is interpreted into world religions in *The Secret Doctrine*, which is a work involved in appropriating authority and prestige, as well as presenting the system of H. P. Blavatsky. Central sections of this Theosophical language were first revealed in 1881 by A. O. Hume, and then in 1883 by A.P. Sinnett, in his *Esoteric Buddhism* (Hume 1881, 17-22; Trompf 2011, 57). Between 1877 (*Isis Unveiled*) and 1888 (*The Secret Doctrine*) we can see the gradual development of the Theosophical parameters, language, system, and intentions. I will trace this development through these key works in relation to H. P. Blavatsky's concern with comparative religion.

Important to this enterprise will be the understanding of the nature of various statements made in H. P. Blavatsky's works, and the nature of her works themselves. Can we recover the intended audiences at whom these works were aimed? Are her works simply “religious” books? Or, do they contain aspects which might fit the description of reasoned study and argument, of the comparative endeavour in short? *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* are texts which are usually described as esoteric or religious works. Precisely what these terms mean, and what this means for the study of Theosophy, needs to be reviewed.

## 8) CHAPTER OUTLINE:

### 8.1) Chapter One - Introduction

This chapter encompasses the literature review, research objectives, and the methodological foundations of this study. I draw on a number of theorists to open the field and allow for the recognition of a new actor in the field of comparative religion, H. P. Blavatsky. Rorty's pragmatist critique of epistemology, Gieryn's discussion of boundary-work in the formation of science, Munslow's narrative history, and Daston and Galison's epistemic codes form the basis for a questioning of received teleological understandings of the late nineteenth century. I aim to show that H. P. Blavatsky produced a justifiable enterprise in comparative religion

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<sup>24</sup> Many of these terms can be easily reviewed in G. de Purucker's *The Occult Glossary* (1933).

when her work is contextualised in light of new readings of past debates around spiritualism and the occult sciences. Once we wrench ourselves from normative and one-dimensional histories of the past, a rich variety of perspectives become available which reveal various ways of being human in the world.

## 8.2) Chapter Two—*Isis Unveiled* and Comparative Religion

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first involves a discussion of various responses to the séance and spiritualist phenomena. In the second I discuss H. P. Blavatsky's enterprise in comparative religion as presented in *Isis Unveiled* (1877). I enter the debate around stances in comparative religion by re-reading nineteenth-century scientific responses to séance and spiritualist phenomena. Specifically, I juxtapose the responses of A. R. Wallace, E. B. Tylor, and H. P. Blavatsky to these phenomena and will argue that all presented legitimate, rational, and reasoned responses to them. A re-description of marginalised scientific perspectives as "emergent" allows me to present *Isis Unveiled* as a reasoned, rational, literary, and rhetorical study of religion. While this work lacks the mature Theosophical vocabulary and developed morphological structuring that her later works will display, and which is the foundation of her developed comparative religion enterprise, it is central to my argument. I will show that the roots of H. P. Blavatsky's comparative endeavour are established in this work, and many of the strategies embraced are here displayed.

## 8.3) Chapter Three – *The Secret Doctrine* and Comparative Religion

The first section of chapter three traces the development of H. P. Blavatsky's mature comparative statement during the years between the publication of *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*. This period between her two main works (1877-1887) is important for the development of the Theosophical system and vocabulary. Three texts were presented during this period, none attributed to Blavatsky, which contained significant steps forward in Theosophical thought. It is an irony of Theosophical history that the system of thought associated with H. P. Blavatsky was first presented in texts she did not apparently author (Hall 2007, 5-38; Trompf 2011, 57).

The second section of the chapter focuses on *The Secret Doctrine* which is H. P. Blavatsky's defining work (Goodrick-Clarke 2004, 14). It is in this text that her mature vocabulary and structuring interpretive scheme is definitively stated. Her authority is announced, her hermeneutic methods made apparent, and I will argue that this work contains Blavatsky's grand attempt to interpret and explain the religions of the world, and indeed the world itself. Theosophical doctrine is the "original" or "primordial" religion, full, correct, and of which derivative religions are corruptions, degenerations, or masks, and it becomes the measure against which all knowledge is assessed. *The Secret Doctrine* is a sustained, rational, and literary text which presents a theory of comparative religion. An examination of the various types of statements made in the work will show the propositional nature of the sentences and, as such, they can be assessed as rational against the broader environment. Blavatsky intended for this work to be engaged with by the scholarly community, among other communities, and judged on its merits.

#### 8.4) Chapter Four–H. P. Blavatsky and Comparative Religion

Chapter four involves a broad contextualising of H. P. Blavatsky's interpretive enterprise in relation to late nineteenth-century movements, trends, and knowledge fields. I discuss the implications and consequences of the "professionalising" of the field of comparative religion and question inherited exclusions which persist to this day. A significant portion of this chapter involves a discussion of how Blavatsky "intersected" with a selection of late nineteenth-century theorists of religion. Working outward from her own references to these scholars, I focus on her "use" of these actors in the field of comparative religion.

#### 8.5) Conclusion

The late nineteenth century was a formative period in the history of comparative religion. I argue that reviewing this period in the light of a pragmatic and narrative methodology will open the field, allowing for the insertion of new actors excluded for various reasons that are no longer philosophically sustainable. In particular, I have examined the works of H. P. Blavatsky as an enterprise in comparative religion, one which has been excluded from mainstream histories. Part of this work has involved understanding the reasons for the exclusion of Theosophical work, both in the late nineteenth century and in current

scholarship. While a pragmatic reading of the ideas of the period opens the field, a narrative understanding of history allows for new stories of the past to be told. Creative and situated author-historian readings of the texts, the contexts, and the participant's various intentions allow for new theories and perspectives. There can be no final narrative or meta-narrative, only justifiable and novel presentations of historical facts and events, assessed for their use. We, and I mean both academics and non-academic commentators on religion, tell stories about ourselves, for ourselves, and in explanation of ourselves.

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### 1) INTRODUCTION AND ENTRY

This chapter is aimed at an elucidation of H. P. Blavatsky's interpretive engagement with religion as outlined in *Isis Unveiled* (1877). Instead of sketching a broad contextual background, I begin by focusing on a central entry point, that of the séance phenomena and "occult sciences" as they were conceptualised in the late nineteenth century. To reiterate, for the sake of argument I treat the séance phenomena and occult sciences as a single category, though my survey will emphasise the former. The debates surrounding these phenomena create a pivot against which the broader historical background, including the new ethnographic data, archaeological finds, translations of Asian texts, internal developments in European philosophy, history, and sciences, and colonial encounters, can be read. The reason for selecting this point of entry is Blavatsky's distinct concern with spiritualism and its associated phenomena in *Isis Unveiled*. Furthermore, the manner in which these marginal sciences and phenomena are read can have a determining influence on the nature of theories of comparative religion. Specifically, I argue that various perspectives on the nature of the mind (psychology), the nature of the world (natural sciences), and of evolutionary processes were being negotiated in the late nineteenth century. This array of positions resulted in varying conceptions of religion.

The larger part of the chapter will involve presenting H. P. Blavatsky's comparative religion enterprise, including the strategies she invoked, and the assumptions on which it was built. It is my contention that Blavatsky and her works existed in the fullness of the late nineteenth century and not in any particular "esoteric" or "occult" current. This chapter will not, for practical reasons, be able to cover every field of nineteenth-century knowledge in any depth. Instead, I emphasise the spectrum of responses in the latter half of the nineteenth century to the séance phenomena and stress a pragmatic, that is, for my purposes, an anti-foundational, historicist, and non-hierarchical perspective. This undoing of normative and essentialist readings of the late nineteenth century will allow for Blavatsky's writings on religion to be reassessed, showing them to be rational, rhetorical, and strategic. Read in this manner, her ideas are not to be gauged as marginal or peripheral to other pursuits in comparative religion of the time. Instead, I show her to be an intelligent and reasoned participant who presented justifiable assertions when they are placed in a pragmatic-based historical context.

To summarise, I aim to present and justify H. P. Blavatsky's engagement with religion, that is, her comparative religion enterprise. The process of justifying her work requires two movements. Firstly, her work must be located and contextualised within the debates of the late nineteenth century. Secondly, the underlying ontological and metaphysical assumptions of other endeavours of the time in various fields, including comparative religion, need to be brought to the fore. This emphasis on the scientific background requires explanation. It is not simply that H. P. Blavatsky's theories are built on general nineteenth-century naturalistic or supernatural orientations towards the world. For Blavatsky, Theosophical statements are propositional statements about the world and humanity. Many of her positions are drawn or inferred from existing positions of the time. She repeatedly enters debates on a wide variety of issues of scientific interest, and by making this move she challenges the binary presentation of religion/science. True religion, in *Isis Unveiled*, is a body of truths and facts about the world, and she ties her work to scientific and philosophical assessments in various ways which I will explore throughout this study. It is only once this division, between religion and science, was settled in our particular way that we now assess religion sociologically, psychologically, and philosophically, instead of as a body of propositional statements about the world. *Isis Unveiled* challenges, then, the binaries of studying religion/being religious, scientific/religious, and professional/amateur. Theosophical doctrine and teachings do not pre-exist their presentation by H. P. Blavatsky and they are, therefore, not some "thing" thinly clothed in scientific discourse or vocabulary, or any other vocabulary. Instead, they are an outgrowth, a rhetorical construction, an assemblage, based on the various knowledge fields of the late nineteenth century. In this I echo Santucci who notes, "The roots of the Theosophical Society may be found in the fascination with science and the increasingly popular view during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the spiritual realm was scientifically verifiable and that its inhabitants – spirits – were in communication with the physical realm" (2006, 1114). Theosophy is the result of Blavatsky's engagement with the late nineteenth century as a whole, and demands assessment in a holistic manner.

### 1.1) An Entry

It has become increasingly clear that spiritualism and the occult sciences were an integral part of late Victorian society (Winter 1998; Luckhurst 2002; Noakes 2008; Pels 2008; Ferguson 2012; Sommer 2014). In this section I review three engagements with and assessments of the

spiritualist séance and its related phenomena. The protagonists are E. B. Tylor, A. R. Wallace, and H. P. Blavatsky. There were certainly other perspectives, ranging from disinterested agnosticism (Huxley) to dismissal (Carpenter) of the phenomena, and judgements ranging from conscious and unconscious fraud to works of the devil.<sup>25</sup> Through this particular selection of participants I hope to gain an insight into various orientations towards the mind, physics, and evolution that were possible in the late nineteenth century. It may be tempting to argue that doubters of séance phenomena remained doubters after investigation and that believers remained believers irrespective of the proven frauds exposed. What, however, do we make of sceptics who changed their opinions after investigation, credible scientists who “converted” to spiritualism? Often, recourse is made to biography as scholars scramble to explain why otherwise “rational” people accepted the reality of such phenomena. This, however, begs the question. Biography cannot be the sole cause of belief and theory, and if it were adherence to naturalistic theories, so much more amenable to us now, would be explained away by the same logic.<sup>26</sup> It seems more fruitful to me to argue that it was not stupid, crazy, irrational, or stubborn to accept that the boundary between the natural and supernatural was under negotiation in the mid to late nineteenth century and that the causes of certain phenomena was invisible intelligences.

A few preliminary points can be noted. H.P. Blavatsky was an outsider who made use of the tensions flowing from the boundary negotiations internal to the scientific community. It is sufficient for my purposes to show that tensions within the sciences existed in the late nineteenth century, and that certain phenomena were sufficiently arresting and credible to require confrontation and engagement. Secondly, a Rortyan perspective on debates allows me to assess both the conditions of arising, that is, the context, *and* the fruit of this process – the actual theories and statements themselves. Rorty’s anti-essentialist, historicist, and pragmatic perspective emphasises the historical context *and* the produced knowledge equally. Knowledge is assessed for its pragmatic use, although this assessment is primarily done retrospectively. At the time of its production a new theory or branch of knowledge is still to be tested for fruitfulness and use. They are emergent fields. One linchpin of my argument is that there is no single “History,” there are only various “histories.” The past is open to

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<sup>25</sup>The irony that recent research into Carpenter reveals an ambivalent attitude towards certain phenomena is not lost on me (Delorme 2014, 57-66).

<sup>26</sup>See Sommer, Andreas. 2016. “Are you afraid of the Dark: Notes on the Psychology of Belief in Histories of Science and the Occult.” *European Journal of Psychotherapy & Counselling* 18: 105-22, for a brief discussion on this theme.

various narrative emplotments which allow for a variety of justifiable outgrowths of perspective in a particular period. The range of potential readings of the late nineteenth century is wider than sometimes presented. Thirdly, Blavatsky challenges any simple science/religion or professional/amateur binary based on essential positions. She accomplishes this by presenting all religious statements as propositional statements about humanity and nature. H. P. Blavatsky's ideas, the result of her reflection on religion, science, and philosophy, are a body of statements to be assessed for their truthfulness against the world (see Harrison 2006). The fruit of her enterprise becomes truth statements about the world and humanity. This emphasises the notion that for her Theosophy is a scientific, i.e. true, body of statements (Smith 2014, 462). The science/religion binary is challenged in a further respect. One frequently comes across statements indicating that phenomena are regarded as "religious." It would, however, make little sense to describe phenomena established by science as "religious," and this is precisely the debate around phenomena in the late nineteenth century. Many phenomena were proposed as evidence for associated emergent sciences, and once they met that threshold the denominating term, "religious," loses its descriptive value.

It is important that scholars "beat the bush" and chase into the open residual normative understandings of this historical period. Reference to the gullibility of scientists engaging with spiritualistic phenomena, or to the willingness to believe of supporters of phenomena, should be challenged. Both of these tendencies, I suggest, are partly the result of retrospectively viewing the debates of the past in light of present values. Scientific naturalists in the nineteenth century were as open to extra-scientific influences as any supporters of "esoteric" phenomena. Depending on what one meant by the terms, "occult" or "esoteric" phenomena were sufficiently plausible in the late nineteenth century to warrant investigation and acceptance or rejection on a rational and scientific basis.

## 1.2) E. B. Tylor

Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917), one of the founders of anthropology, though longer-lived than H. P. Blavatsky, was a direct contemporary of hers. It is worth noting for two reasons that his major work, *Primitive Culture*, was published in 1871. The first is that it is near contemporaneous with Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* (1877). The second reason is that 1871 predates his recorded investigations into spiritualism, which were undertaken in 1872



(Stocking 1971). How, then, can we account for the differing stances of these two works on the issue of spiritualist phenomena, one which became a founding text of the field of anthropology, the other destined for marginalization in the realm of the esoteric? By examining the variety of contextualised responses to spiritualism and the séance phenomena in the late nineteenth century, I suggest we can undo some of the distinctions of the past. The larger story of Tylor's engagement has been told in a number of articles, my focus being on the question of what Tylor *did* with the séance phenomena (Stocking 1971; Pels 2003; Pels 2008, 275-78; Schüttpelz 2010). How are they drawn into his larger narrative?

The relatively slight ambiguity Tylor revealed towards séance phenomena is suggestive only insofar as it shows how arresting a spiritualistic séance could be when personally experienced in the context of broader social conversations. Stocking (1971) notes an evolution in Tylor's assessment of the phenomena across his "notes." Initially, Tylor's assessment of the phenomena was that of fraud. This, however, evolved to an undecided position on some events, to an eventual "*prima facie*" case based on the evidence. It was an assessment, as Stocking shows, based more on hearsay than on his actual personal experiences (Stocking 1971, 100). In *Primitive Culture*, Tylor works to separate an ethnographic evaluation of the phenomena from a possible investigation of ("spirit-manifestation") "facts insufficiently appreciated and explained by science" (1873, vol. I, 142). Such an investigation may "throw light on some most interesting psychological questions" (1873, vol. I, 142). Despite this noted ambiguity Tylor is, however, clear on the implications of his ethnographic assessment of spiritualism (Pels 2003, 257-8).

Tylor proposed an evolutionary development from animism to modern science. This sets up a homology between early humankind, savages, barbarians, the uncivilized, persons of low intellectual condition, and lower races. These are set up in opposition to nineteenth-century Western European civilization. He further makes a rhetorical link between Magic and the "Occult Sciences," both of which characterize the "lower races" of the past and the present. His further move is to link these to the spiritualistic phenomena of the late nineteenth century. The belief in magic, he notes, is "one of the most pernicious delusions that ever vexed mankind" (1873, vol. I, 112). The ancient magician is both a "dupe" and a "cheat," and magic is a pseudo-science and superstition, a sincere but false system of philosophy (1873, vol. I, 134). From this evolutionary stance flow any number of distinctions, including that of religion as delusion versus science as objective, and the notion that material culture is the gauge of moral and mental evolution (Pels 2003, 258; Chidester 2014, 95). The same

assessment of ancient magic is then applied to spiritualistic phenomena. Mediums are conscious or unconscious frauds, displaying hysterical symptoms and having, possibly, mesmeric capacities to lull the senses of the investigator. Spiritualism was, then, a revival and/or survival of an earlier stage of human thought based on, amongst other things, the basic error of mistaking internal (subjective) and external (objective) life (Chidester 2014, 94). When not deliberately deceiving, mediums have a delusional belief in their own phenomena and have a capacity to mesmerise and delude others. Tylor's basic problem was that according to his evolutionary theory these phenomena should only have gained acceptance amongst the "lower classes," the contemporary savages. Instead, individuals from all levels of nineteenth-century society managed to become convinced of the reality of the séance phenomena. I noted at the beginning of my discussion of Tylor that *Primitive Culture* was originally published in 1871, a year before his investigation of spiritualism. He was, therefore, already invested in a particular conception of the phenomena. Spiritualism threatened the foundation of his theory, the implications of which, were the phenomena to be real, would be to question the whole Enlightenment movement and suggest that European society was in some ways possibly degenerating (1873, 156). The most Tylor could allow himself in his published works was a slight ambiguity.

### 1.3) A. R. Wallace

Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) is an interesting figure not simply because of his link to E. B. Tylor and spiritualism, but because of his importance to H. P. Blavatsky. Wallace's story has been told a number of times and I mention here only those parts relevant to my broader argument (Turner 1974; Kottler 1974, 144-92; Oppenheim 1985, 296-325; Pels 1995, 69-91; Fichman 2001, 227-50; Pels 2003, 241-71). Wallace, a biologist and anthropologist, is remembered to history for, among other things, being the co-founder of evolution with Darwin. Despite an early interest in mesmerism and phrenology, he was, by his own admission, initially a "philosophical sceptic" and a "materialist" (Wallace 1955, 8). Between 1865 and 1869, however, Wallace underwent a profound change of mind and became increasingly involved in spiritualistic phenomena, the implications of which began to infiltrate his theories.

After attending a series of séances during the late 1860s Wallace became convinced of the reality of spiritualistic phenomena, and of the spiritualist explanation of these phenomena. In

short, he accepted that disembodied spirits of the deceased, or other disembodied intelligences, could affect the material world and communicate with the living. The “facts” of the séance, as scholars are so wont to quote, “beat him” (Wallace 1955, 8; Pels 1995, 69; Pels 2003, 241). Once he had become convinced of the reality of séance phenomena, a change in his anthropological opinions was practically inevitable. No longer could the materialistic assumptions of natural selection explain what he was experiencing in the spiritualist environment. This is, it should be noted, the essence of my argument around the work of H. P. Blavatsky. Once one admits the reality of an invisible side of nature, and a mind independent of the body and which survives death, one’s perspective on religion would need to begin to reflect this. Materialistic theories, obviously, need to contend with the universal error of the mind/body problem and a spiritual world. Wallace attempted to convince a number of fellow scientists, including Darwin, Huxley, Tyndall, and Carpenter, of the reality of spiritualist phenomena, but failed. We might note that despite this failure to convince these prominent scientists he could, and did, reference many scientists and other luminaries who had been so convinced, including, Varley, Crookes, Lodge, and others (Wallace 1955, 41).

By 1869 Wallace had come to believe that natural selection as a principle of present utility and relative perfection could not explain a number of things, including the origin of consciousness, the origin of the moral and intellectual natures in humanity, the human hand, external form, organs of speech, and the large brain (Kottler 1974, 150).<sup>27</sup> Prehistoric peoples and savages, for example, seemingly had a brain the same size as modern humanity, but did not require it to be so. Savages had these latent capacities but did not require them for survival. It is important here to recall Stephen Jay Gould’s assessment of Wallace’s perspective. It is not simply that Wallace abandoned natural selection for spiritualist theories. Wallace stuck to a particular “hyper-selectionist” and rigid understanding of natural selection, a version which could not explain the existence of the human mind and other qualities (Gould 1982, 53.) For Gould, Wallace’s perspective is “logical” but flawed. The perceived shortcomings of natural selection in explaining various problems were resolved by Wallace by arguing for the existence of “higher intelligences” that could influence humanity and evolution. These were conscious beings that were able to influence matter through the use of will-power or force.

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<sup>27</sup>Peter J. Bowler has highlighted the general nineteenth-century concerns over “man’s mental and moral attributes” in relation to evolutionary theories (1989, 229).

Alfred Russel Wallace dismissed Theosophical works for being “imaginative” and not “rational,” terms loosely associated with some of his own ideas in the estimation of scientists who found his “conversion” difficult to accept (Oppenheim 1985, 321). The liberal use of notions of standards of rationality and imagination to judge ideas and theories shows little more than that these terms are used as weapons as much as objective assessments. It is useful to review the ideas of Wallace that H. P. Blavatsky would have had little problem in accepting, or incorporating into her work, in one form or another. These include:

- Miracles are attested in all ages, and provide proof for contemporary spiritualistic phenomena (Wallace 1955, 16, 199)
- The notion of degeneration of races (Kottler 1974, 160) [Only a conceptual step from cycles.]
- Two lines of evolution – spiritual/mental and physical (Wallace 1955, 207; Turner 1974, 74; Oppenheim 1985, 311, 319)
- Will force (cosmic and human) influencing matter (Kottler 1974, 156; Oppenheim 1985, 317)
- There is life after death (Wallace 1955, 207; Kottler 1974, 184)
- Seeking truth for oneself, democratic epistemology (Wallace 1955, 216; Pels 1995, 76)
- Humanity will become a homogenous race in the future (Turner 1974, 76)
- The laws of nature are rational, a rational religion (Turner 1974, 90)
- There are disembodied intelligences and higher intelligences which supervised the emergence of the human organism (Kottler 1974, 156; Oppenheim 1985, 303; Wallace 1955, 9, 47)
- Reality of clairvoyance, and of higher senses in the human being – superior modes of sensation, more developed in some than others (Wallace 1955, 29, 50, 51, 57, 101; Pels 1995, 82)
- The spirit survives in an ethereal body after death (Wallace 1955, 108; Kottler 1974, 162)
- The spirit can partially or totally leave the body and return to it – there being an ethereal link to the body (Wallace 1955, 101)
- The spirit retains what it learnt during life (Wallace 1955, 101, 102; Kottler 1974, 184)

It is not my suggestion that H. P. Blavatsky remained within the parameters of Wallace's speculations. Jeffrey D. Lavoie's criticism of her, that she misused/misquoted Wallace's work, falls short (2012, 326-9). I am arguing that her speculations and inferences remained within the parameters of what logic allowed. In this she is no different to, for example, Foucault or Rorty, who were similarly criticised for their "misuse" of historical and philosophical sources. H. P. Blavatsky quite clearly made use of the material available in original, creative, and specific ways. It is the case that she, like Wallace and others, speculated in reasoned, logical, rhetorical, and literary ways to produce their theories and perspectives. While they may have moved in different directions, they were not doing radically different things. Reading Wallace's *Miracles and Modern Spiritualism*, I am struck by its theoretical, speculative, rhetorical, and argumentative nature. Wallace was philosophising his way forward, as was Blavatsky in *Isis Unveiled*.

#### 1.4) H. P. Blavatsky

In 1876, in a moment of frustration, H. P. Blavatsky posed a question, the import of which we can begin to appreciate from a Rortyan perspective. She asked, "Now, arguing from the standpoint of strict justice, in what respect is a Materialistic theorist any better than a Spiritualistic one?" (1977, 228) From her earliest recorded writings in 1874, she revealed a distinct sympathy for spiritualism and its attendant phenomena. Many of the main points she raised in her pre-*Isis Unveiled* writings were developed in this first major work. I have, therefore, chosen to begin my investigation with this work. There are, though, also important statements prior to 1877. For example, she claims to have been "sent" to America to defend spiritualism in light of recent exposures of fraud. She further claims responsibility for some of the phenomena which occurred at the sittings of the Eddy's and Holmes's (Blavatsky 1977, 53, 73). This reveals a move to appropriate authority, and to displace and decentre alternative explanatory discourses around spiritualistic phenomena. The issues raised by these interventions will be brought into relief through a discussion of spiritualism and its phenomena as they are presented in *Isis Unveiled*.

Blavatsky sets up a rhetorical opposition between Science and Theology. The first is materialistic and dogmatic, the second is simply dogmatic. She presents spiritualism as a possible compromise between these two. It is a compromise as its promise was to use the methods of science to prove the statements of religion. She suggests, however, that

spiritualism is “uncouth” and “shapeless.” Nevertheless, “Spiritualism has never pretended to be anything more than a science, a growing philosophy, or rather a research in hidden and as yet unexplained forces in nature” (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. I, 83). Lamenting the way spiritualists and scientists, whose methods are conservative and dogmatic, have engaged with the phenomena of the séance, Blavatsky anticipates a time in which spiritualism will be regarded as a true science (1988a, vol. I, 84; vol. II, 637). The notion of spiritualism and the “occult sciences” as being emergent sciences was current among sympathisers at the time, as well as being reflected in contemporary research (Luckhurst 2002, 2).

H. P. Blavatsky separates the actual séance phenomena from the spiritualistic, scientific, and theological explanations of them. According to Blavatsky, spiritualists misunderstand and incorrectly explain the phenomena, which remain authentic (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. II, 636). In opposition to these positions she inserts her Theosophical, occult, and esoteric explanation. She rejects the theory that disembodied spirits of the deceased are responsible for all the phenomena. Theological responses, including the “devil theory,” fraud, and partial and uncritical acceptance, also lack the scientific and explanatory force that she is aiming for. Much of her writings on spiritualism in *Isis Unveiled* are, however, rooted in the varied responses of science to the phenomena. Her insights revolve around various strategies, which are of some relevance to my argument. Pointing to the “conflicting opinions of our men of science about certain occult phenomena,” she distinguishes between scientific defenders and detractors of the phenomena. The latter group include Huxley, Tyndall, Faraday, Carpenter, Agassiz, Mendeleyeff, and others. Defenders she identified include Wallace, Crookes, Wagner, Butlerhof, Varley, Buchanan, Hare, Reichenbach, Thury, Perty, de Morgan, Hoffmann, Goldschmidt, Flammarion, Aksakof, and Sergeant Cox. These latter scientists are more courageous, honest, and have more integrity than those opposed (1988a, vol. I, 44, 54, 63). Blavatsky further explains that scientists who have rejected the phenomena as evidence of an unseen universe and of an invisible mind are characterised by a number of limiting assumptions. For one thing, Materialism as a philosophy is a “vicious circle” from which, by its very nature, it cannot escape. It does not contain the possibility within it of an invisible side to nature hence it cannot properly engage with phenomena (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. I, 114). For another, they either lack, or refuse to acknowledge, personal experiences of the various phenomena. Finally, and ironically in light of the criticisms aimed at believers of the phenomena, some scientists who did engage with the phenomena on a personal basis were either prejudiced or deeply sceptical of the reality of the phenomena. A deeply sceptical

frame of mind would prevent the objective investigation of the séance events (1988a, vol. I, 74-5). Assessing the denouncers of phenomena, Blavatsky refers to various scientists “own confessions of failure in experimental research,” of mysteries which baffle them, of missing links in their theories, of their inability to understand phenomena, and of their incapacity to research the laws of the causal world (1988a, vol. I, xlv). Repeatedly, and erroneously, she will claim that scientists cannot explain the phenomena. Scientists, obviously, produced any number of explanatory theories and, in truth, she simply cannot accept the various materialistic interpretations they presented.

What then is the Theosophical, occult, esoteric, and true explanation of the séance phenomena? Blavatsky presents a number of solutions to this question. She rejects any notion of miracles beyond the domain of science and human reason. Drawing on the definition of the word “miracle” from Webster’s *American Dictionary*, she suggests that scientists have not infallibly established anything, and that they have not discovered every law of nature.<sup>28</sup> Secondly, she links phenomena to the field of psychology – which she suggests is a “*terra incognita*” for nineteenth-century science (1988a, vol. I, 46). Thirdly, though related to the second point, she links the phenomena to powers of the soul. She writes, “Call the phenomena force, energy, electricity or magnetism, will, or spirit-power, it will ever be the partial manifestation of the *soul*, whether disembodied or imprisoned for a while in its body” (1988a, vol. I, 58). Fourthly, she argues that the human will is involved in the production of the phenomena, and she is opposed to any passive mediumship. Fifthly, she disputes the spiritualist’s explanation that all communication is from disembodied human spirits. She proposes the existence of non-human intelligences, such as elementals and elementaries, as being behind phenomena, and the existence of adepts who can consciously produce certain phenomena at will (1988a, vol. I, 67). Finally, Blavatsky admits that fraud is an explanation for many of the phenomena, though she disputes that it is explanatory of all phenomena, current and historical.

The implications of the above moves are important as they lead into H. P. Blavatsky’s perspective on, and interpretation of, religion. One strategy in supporting the reality of phenomena is to create a link between her personal experiences, contemporary reports supporting the phenomena, and the reports of “universal testimony” of the past. In 1874 Blavatsky declared, “I am far from being credulous. Though a Spiritualist of many years

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<sup>28</sup>Webster’s dictionary definition of a “miracle” is, in part, “Specifically, an event or effect contrary to the established constitution and course of things, or a deviation from the known laws of nature” (1865, 842).

standing [glossed by her as “occultist”], I am more sceptical in receiving evidence from paid mediums than many unbelievers” (1977, 34). It is a dead-end to doubt her honesty, or to suggest that she had vested interests in the phenomena being true. Once one heads down this avenue, one would need to apply the same criteria to non-believing scientists and investigators. If it is one’s position that “interests” determine belief, then this assumption would need to be uniformly applied. To take an example, Frank M. Turner notes, “The naturalistic publicists sought to expand the influence of scientific ideas for the purpose of secularizing society rather than for the goal of advancing science internally. Secularizing was their goal; science, their weapon” (1974, 16). Blavatsky repeatedly refers to her personal experiences of phenomena (1988a, vol. I, 43, 69, 368, 474). She is also prepared to accept the testimony of acquaintances and members of the Theosophical Society (1988a, vol. I, 66, 121). Her important move is to expand these endorsements of the reality of phenomena to all ages and times – a “universal testimony” (1988a, vol. I, 49, 50, 53, 71, 117, 340). She makes a further important rhetorical move by linking the contemporary spiritualistic phenomena to the “magic” of the ancients, as had Tylor, though with opposite results.<sup>29</sup> The flow of her argument is that contemporary phenomena are real, that the same phenomena pertained in the past in all ages and climes and, therefore, the “ancients” were in a similar position in terms of knowledge potential as the late nineteenth century (1988a, vol. I, 30, 42, 49, 50, 53, 117, 127, 205, 220, 305, 486). This vindication of the past and its phenomena lead into her understanding of religion. In particular, these strategies enable her to challenge materialistic theories of the mind and physics, and the paradigm of evolution. If the phenomena are real now, and were real in the past, and the true explanation of phenomena is an invisible side to nature and a mind/soul separate from the body, then evolution is challenged in various ways. The implications of an anthropology which posits a physical, mental, and spiritual nature of the individual, coupled with a cosmology which included invisible intelligences beyond the material, will insist on a perspective on religion different to those which posit theories based on naturalistic and materialistic philosophies. Not only did Tylor, Wallace, and Blavatsky read the world in different ways, they were, in some sense, differently constituted types of people with differing capacities. With Rorty, we do not assess the truth to the world of these various positions; instead, we look to their justifiability in their historical context.

I would like to briefly draw these issues together before turning to *Isis Unveiled* and comparative religion. For my purposes, all these issues become concentrated in a primary

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<sup>29</sup>H. P. Blavatsky had forcibly made this claim at least as early as 1875 (1977, 101, 137).



concern, that of epistemology. Negotiations over who had the right to speak, what were valid concerns and objects of investigation, what questions were the sciences promising to answer, on what foundations and assumptions were positions based, and what counted as knowledge all centre around the question of epistemology. There are various strands which form the background of the late nineteenth-century engagement with religion, including archaeological finds, encounters with new cultures during colonial expansion, the new texts being translated, internal developments in European philosophical, scientific, and historical thought, issues of professionalising and disciplining, and the hidden relations of power projected by the various groups. The manner in which these strands unfolded can be brought into focus by entering the debates through the nineteenth century engagements with the séance phenomena. I am not arguing that all these concerns were necessarily or exclusively focused around psychical phenomena. I am, instead, suggesting that many of the relevant issues can be brought into relief by centring my study on the engagements with these phenomena. It is here that the boundary of many fields were worked out, applied, and reflected.

Frank M. Turner notes that the 1860s and 1870s were the “halcyon” years of scientific naturalism (1974, 17; Luckhurst 2002, 12). Scientific naturalism invoked empiricism along with an adherence to Dalton’s atomic theory of matter, the theory of conservation of energy, and evolution (Lightman 2001, 346). Research has shown that scientific naturalism was not the sole player in the field. It needs to be distinguished from Positivism, a strict Materialism, the popularizers of science, as well as from the “North British” scientists who challenged its basic assumptions and whose influence faded only in the 1880s (Lightman 2001, 343-66; Turner 1993, 17-8). H. P. Blavatsky frequently referenced *The Unseen Universe* (1875) by Balfour Stewart and Peter Guthrie Tait, members of the latter group.<sup>30</sup> Frank M. Turner’s *Between Science and Religion* discusses a specific selection of individuals who cogently challenged scientific naturalism. Two assessments summarise the general state of the 1870s. Luckhurst writes, “I want then to read the 1870s less as a passage of secularization than as a confused and confusing series of engagements over the relative value of ‘spirit’ and ‘matter’” (2002, 12). Janet Oppenheim, discussing Wallace, notes “It was not yet impossible in the late nineteenth century to call oneself an empiricist and still maintain the independent role of the mind, or spirit, in the physical world” (1985, 324). This position is further bolstered by

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<sup>30</sup>For short discussion of H. P. Blavatsky’s use of this work, and her general comments on electricity, one may refer to Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke’s two articles, “The Esoteric uses of Electricity: Theologies of Electricity from Swabian Pietism to Ariosophy” (2004, 69-90), and “The Divine Fire: H. P. Blavatsky and the Theology of Electricity” (2003, 4-20).

Matthew Stanley's study which frames the debate not in terms of religion versus science but between theistic science and naturalistic science, both of which shared almost identical methodological values (2015, 4, 80).

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the disciplining and professionalising of a wide variety of fields. Some of the characteristics of professionalization are outlined by Turner. They include a generalized and systematized knowledge, an orientation towards larger society over individual interests, a notion of self-control through codes of ethics often embodied in professional organisations, a system of rewards, attempts to have one's ideas taken up in the wider educational system, and methods to distribute knowledge into society (1993, 175).<sup>31</sup> From this flows the polemical distinction between professionals and amateurs, insiders and outsiders, with H. P. Blavatsky usually cast into the amateur mould (Godwin 1994, 311; Hanegraaff 2013, 154, 221, 239, 254-5). In relation to séance phenomena this shift in, and appropriation of, authority in the direction of naturalistic visions of the world repeated itself in many countries. The breakdown into scientific critics and defenders of psychical phenomena has been discussed by a variety of scholars and the 1870s has been highlighted as such a period of negotiation (Rawson 1978; Oppenheim 1985; Noakes 1999, 2004, 2004a, 2005, 2007, 2008; Stauber 2001; Wolfram 2012; Sommer 2014). The bare process of professionalising implies boundary work but not content. That is, disciplining inevitably excludes that which falls outside the new codes, but this is not linked to specific a-historical content. Any field can professionalize, from sports codes to scientific fields to astrological societies. Psychical research itself professionalized as a field in 1882 with the founding of the Society for Psychical Research. Initially the society contained both spiritualists and scientists with the latter eventually coming to dominate. Professionalizing, furthermore, implies no value to the new regime adopted beyond that which the new regime has now itself imposed. Scientists sympathetic to spiritualism are often explained away as attempting to reassert a "religious" impulse. This evaluation is problematic for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it ignores the real epistemological issues that underlay the competing visions of science, a point raised

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<sup>31</sup>See also Poovey, Mary. 1998. *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. Poovey also identifies the 1870s as the period during which the sciences professionalised and the issues associated with interpreting the "fact" was increasingly referred to professional and disciplinary bodies (1998, 3). Ruth Barton, discussing the period between the 1850s and 1880s, has challenged the validity of the professional/amateur distinction, arguing that it was not reflected in the vocabulary of the time. She proposes a notion of hierarchical negotiation within each discipline in its place (2003, 73-119). My broader rhetorical point is that within this period various negotiations are still under way, resulting in inclusions, exclusions, and evaluative placing. Teleological impulses should be read out of our constructions of the past, and this, combined with the unsettled nature of the period, suggests that there is no convincing reason to continue to exclude H. P. Blavatsky from our histories.

by Lamont with his argument that a “crisis of evidence” was instituted by the séance phenomena (Lamont 2004, 897-920). It also ignores the non-religious impulse which questioned scientific naturalism and pointed to its inherent shortcomings as a theory. Secondly, it masks the subtle assumption that science or naturalism is more objective and true than other impulses. Opponents of the reality of séance phenomena and “occult sciences” were as motivated by extra-scientific concerns as any other participant. As referenced above, Turner notes, referring to scientific naturalists, “Secularization was their goal; science, their weapon” (1974, 16). Matthew Stanley has also pointed to a naturalist near “conspiracy to take over science” which was accomplished not because of a methodological superiority but because of extra-scientific strategies (2015, 4, 8, 242).

We can extend this observation to Max Müller and comparative religion when Olender refers to his “theological presuppositions” which “determined his approach to linguistics and religious history” (1992, 87). It is difficult to decide now which we find less problematic, Tylor’s arbitrary classificatory impulse or Wallace’s notion that “facts” can speak for themselves. Pels is illuminating in revealing the shift from Baconian democratic, intuitive, domestic, and inductive epistemology to a more professional, positivist, laboratory ethos – Blavatsky falling into the former grouping (Pels 2000; Noakes 2002; Pels 2003; Porter 2006, 1-5; Pels 2008). Blavatsky’s constant reference to “personal experience,” both her own and that of others, as a guarantor of facts further supports this observation.<sup>32</sup> Pels has dealt in depth with Wallace and Tylor and less with, for example, Crookes, Varley, and Barrett, who brought laboratory techniques into investigative procedures. Also missing in the debate thus far is Daston and Galison’s study of objectivity and the underlying epistemic codes they identify. Much of the philosophical foundations of strict naturalism and empiricism are undone by the truth-to-nature impulse of the scientist “sage” who could divine what nature intended. These scientists looked beyond what they saw and recorded, and portrayed what was meant to be—what nature intended. This is a move away from pure perception into the realm of reasoned images, virtually a Platonic search for original forms. Rorty’s critique of epistemology enables one to bypass foundational claims to knowledge and allows us to review this past in non-evaluative ways. There is no privileged position, no neutral space, and

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<sup>32</sup>Olav Hammer discusses in detail “narratives of experience” in New Age discourse in his *Claiming Knowledge* (2004, 331-453). However, his comments miss the point in relation to H. P. Blavatsky’s appeal to experience in relation to séance and spiritualistic phenomena, as found in *Isis Unveiled*. These were not elitist or privileged experiences, they were open and available to the whole of the Western world regardless of class, status, or belief.

no infallible theory with which we can assess events and theories. There are, however, justified positions and their assessment for use. In this work I focus primarily on the former, the justification. Use is a retrospective evaluation.

The assumptions of the late nineteenth century are undone; many barely outlived the century. Its epistemological assumptions, its general notion of progressivist history, and its justifications for marginalizing various perspectives have been challenged. Kuhn, Rorty, Foucault, and others have created a space to reread the past. I move now to occupy a section of that space by assessing H. P. Blavatsky's enterprise in comparative religion as presented in *Isis Unveiled*.

## 2) INTRODUCTION TO *ISIS UNVEILED*

The general background and the details surrounding the writing of *Isis Unveiled: A Master-key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology* (1877) have been well presented in a number of works on Theosophy (Zirkoff 1972, vol. I, 1-61; Olcott 1974, 202-19; Ryan 1975, 61-78; Gomes 1987, 110-58; Godwin 1994, 277-306). Rather than repeat these well-documented details, I will focus on the basic points relevant to the present study, giving voice to H. P. Blavatsky on the subject of comparative religion. *Isis Unveiled* represents one particular response to the constellation of competing forces, ideas, intellectual positions, and cultural stances in the late nineteenth century. It would be going too far to say that H. P. Blavatsky presented a unique position with no points in common to earlier or contemporary theorists. Her views are, however, distinct and deserve a more nuanced assessment than they have thus far received.

### 2.1) Production of Authority

I am interested here in assessing various statements H. P. Blavatsky, and others, made concerning the writing and inspiration of *Isis Unveiled*. My aim is to give her a voice without the restraints often imposed by normative judgements. In the background, we need to keep in mind the situated nature of academic perspectives. For example, Blavatsky referred to the idea that discoveries are made through a “flash” of intuition and not through inductive methods (1988a, vol. I, 513). This is a version of the Context Distinction – the distinction

between the *context of discovery* and the *context of justification* – which though now challenged, is still suggestive (Salmon 1984, 10-4; Arabatzis 2006, 215-30). We need, therefore, to invoke other mechanisms to undo the constraints of the past. I have proposed the narrative production of knowledge, the anti-essentialist perspective of Rorty, the boundary work outlined by Gieryn, and the observations of Daston and Galison as potential tools to allow this voice.

H. P. Blavatsky concedes that various persons were involved in organising, editing, writing, abridging, proofreading, and giving inspiration for parts of *Isis Unveiled* (Wilder 1908; Zirkoff 1972, 43; Olcott 1974, vol. I, 217; Blavatsky 1988c, vol. II, 45-53). However, referring to her major works, she notes,

What I claim in them as my own is only the fruit of my learning and studies in a department hitherto left uninvestigated by Science, and almost unknown to the European world. I am perfectly willing to leave the honor of the English grammar in them, the glory of the quotations from scientific works brought occasionally to me to be used as passages for comparison with, or refutation by, the old Science, and finally the general make-up of the volumes, to every one of those who have helped me.

But that which none of them will ever claim from first to last, is the fundamental doctrine, the philosophical conclusions and teachings. Nothing of that have I invented, but have simply given it out as I have been taught; or as quoted by me in *The Secret Doctrine* (Vol. I, p. xlv) from Montaigne: “I have here made only a nosegay of culled [Eastern] flowers, and brought nothing of my own but the string that ties them.” (1988c, vol. II, 53)

She refers to her “learning” and “studies,” and her imagery of the “nosegay of culled flowers” seems a fitting metaphor for the narrative quality her work displays. This passage, however, also hints at the unconventional nature of production, to which I now turn.

Theosophical scholars are quick to reference the occult production of *Isis Unveiled*. We might surmise that for them, besides being believable, these claims enhance the authority of the work and the charisma of the author. As an example we might note,

From the ordinary worldly standpoint, *Isis Unveiled* was of course written by H. P. Blavatsky, and on that, exoterically, nothing more needs to be said. From the viewpoint of occult fact and doctrine, however, the authorship of this remarkable

work is not so easily determined, and requires careful consideration of little-known and rather abstruse teachings of the Esoteric Philosophy. (Zirkoff 1972, 11)

Additional claims of special production are listed by Boris de Zirkoff as including “precipitation” and clairaudience (1972, 11). Blavatsky subsumes many of these claims into the fields of hypnotism and thought transference. For her, no “supernatural claim” is made, and no “miracle” performed. She remarks that hypnotism and related fields are “now accepted by science and under full scientific investigation” (1988c, vol. II, 48). Academic scholars too note these special claims, but in this context the references serve a different purpose. In academic studies, claims of special production serve to delegitimize and reduce the authority, if not the rationality, of the author. Lavoie can argue that *Isis Unveiled* was in part “channelled,” and notes, “Blavatsky composed this work by using her psychic senses to peer into the astral light guided by her masters” (2012, 178).

The different interpretive environments, Theosophical and academic, are thrown further into stark contrast by H. S. Olcott when commenting on the various hypotheses concerning the inspiration of *Isis Unveiled*. He proposes seven possible hypotheses, the first five are psychic based, while the last two are rational based. The latter are,

6. Or was it written by several alternately latent and active personalities of herself?
7. Or simply by her as the uninspired, uncontrolled and not obsessed Russian lady, H.P.B., in the usual state of waking consciousness, and differing in no way from any author doing a work of this class? (Olcott 1974, 221)

Olcott dismissed these two in favour of the psychic-based explanations for the inspiration of *Isis Unveiled*.

These special claims must be referenced as they are made by and on behalf of H. P. Blavatsky. These claims, however, should not be used to delegitimize her works. In the current academic climate, scholars should but record, determine their function in a particular context, and then ignore these special claims. To act in any other manner, that is, to take the claims seriously enough to exclude her work from normal consideration, would risk them having to take such psychic claims as plausible. Academics cannot make this move, and as such can only regard the book as being produced in a normal, naturalistic, and rational manner. Once this is admitted the work is open to assessment, review, and acceptance or rejection as a body of ideas by the academic community. It is this latter task I undertake.

Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* is a rhetorical, rational, and reasoned argument on those topics of the day which she judged important. Additionally, she made use of increasingly common and obligatory scholarly legitimising techniques, for example, the use of footnotes and references (Munslow 2003, 53-4; Chidester 2014, 277-8, 285; Stuckrad 2014, 102).<sup>33</sup> I suggest that she “played the game” and her non-materialistic theory of religion reflected the ambiguity and potential that existed in the late nineteenth century. A further important point, habitually ignored by academics, is the exact nature of the psychic inspiration as detailed by Blavatsky. Many of her supernormal episodes reveal a distinct literary and non-gnostic quality. I mean this in a literal sense, for example, when she explains how she “reads” books in the astral light to the point that page numbers can be identified. In another instance she sees in the astral light “large and long rolls of paper on which things are written” (Bester 2012, 52-4). While it may seem trite, we are forced to ask ourselves: Is reading a published book in the astral light different from reading the same book in the hand? In terms of the practical result, perhaps it is not.

The production of *Isis Unveiled* can be examined from various perspectives but, in the final analysis, H. P. Blavatsky's ideas are to be assessed for novelty, coherence, justifiability, and pragmatics. Emphasising a point made by Barthes and reiterated by Munslow concerning the “death of the author,” it is I, the academic and historian, who produces this reading of H. P. Blavatsky. I too, with H. P. Blavatsky, conjure a work, a text with meaning, one which presents itself for assessment and evaluation. H. P. Blavatsky did not fix the meaning of her writings; rather, they can be seen as causal, and remain open to investigation, evaluation, and appreciation (Barthes 1988, 166-72; Munslow 2003; Munslow 2011, 77-9).

## 2.2) Academic Assessments of *Isis Unveiled*

While the qualities characterising scholarly writing span both Theosophical and university-based academic publications, I will focus on standard academic views of *Isis Unveiled*. I have found a number of Theosophical assessments quite balanced, but they do exist within a relatively uncritical environment that accepts the larger Theosophical claims. The range of positions proposed in academic presentations, however, leads me to suspect that more is at play than simple objective description. Many scholars have successfully identified the main

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<sup>33</sup>See Anthony Grafton *The Footnote* (1997) for a study of this device, a consideration of which would reveal H. P. Blavatsky's conventional use of it.

themes of *Isis Unveiled*. However, there is a recurring tendency to judge the work and find it wanting. I challenge the norms and standards against which a work like this has been measured, and against which it falls short.

Isaac Lubelsky's work, *Celestial India: Madame Blavatsky and the Birth of Indian Nationalism* (2012) consolidates many of the negative scholarly criticisms of H. P. Blavatsky. Lubelsky has not decided if Blavatsky's claims are based on revelation or are pseudo-scholarly in nature. For Lubelsky, her works display an "irrational character," pose questions they then set out to answer, present ideas that are a "mind-boggling," are a "hodge podge," use "doubtful evidence," and mix sources in a way which produces "incoherent passages." He further claims that *Isis Unveiled* became a Theosophist's "Bible" (2012, 118, 121-6). None of these claims should remain unchallenged. To begin with, normative standards of rationality are simply unhelpful and unsustainable (Rorty 1980, 11, 333; Davidson, 1990, 450; Evnine 1991, 11-14; Rorty 1991, 35, 37; Godlove 2002, 14-16). To label a text a "Bible" is a distancing technique, and this accusation will not withstand historical scrutiny. I would like to propose, that Theosophical ideas were no more only "religiously" accepted by sympathisers than were those of, for example, evolution by its sympathisers, a point made by Mary Midgley (1985). A similar point is implied by Rorty where he argues that we should reject the notion of the scientist as "priest," the interpreter of the "real" world (1991, 35-36.). Walter E. Houghton can refer to the intellectuals of the nineteenth century as "prophets" and Ruth Barton records the term "votaries of science" in the period (Houghton 1975, 138; Barton 2003, 73-119). That Blavatsky "framed" the debate in a particular way is true. Yet, is this not the nature of argumentation? *Isis Unveiled* might be assessed as disorganised after a cursory glance. A proper study of it reveals, however, a clear argument which will be developed over her writings.

Jeffrey D. Lavoie, in his work *The Theosophical Society: The History of a Spiritualist Movement*, reflects Lubelsky's position. *Isis Unveiled* is "disorganised," has "rambling tirades," and attempts to bring together various incompatible subjects. Perhaps most problematic is his charge that Blavatsky "picked and chose the parts that defended her pre-conceived philosophy" (2012, 181). This is no doubt true, as it is of a great many works, academic and otherwise. It is more profitable to regard *Isis Unveiled* as a sustained argument, outlining a position based on a holistic use of the resources available.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>See Tim Rudbøgg's (2012) critical review of Lavoie's work in *Theosophical History* vol. xvi, 2.



Olav Hammer, in his *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age*, notes that both *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* have “shortcomings as religious literature” (2004, 222). Precisely what “shortcomings” religious literature may have is not clear. This evaluation, however, reflects Hammer’s general opinion that “The Esoteric Tradition can hardly be said to be supported by profound philosophical arguments,” an unhelpful statement in my reading (2004, 339). Hammer, like Lubelsky, has not quite decided if *Isis Unveiled* is revelatory text or an example of pseudo-scholarship.

These scholars present useful insights into *Isis Unveiled*. Many identify the main themes and topics. It is the value judgments that betray their own foundations, and reveal the problematic nature of their engagement with a work such as this. Most of these studies accept and perpetuate the current exclusionary historical narrative which predominates, the origin of which was the late nineteenth century. It is precisely this narrative which is to be re-evaluated.

Four scholars to have presented more balanced perspectives on *Isis Unveiled* are Joscelyn Godwin in his *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (1994), Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke in *Helena Blavatsky* (2004), Wouter J. Hanegraaff in *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (1998), and Bruce F. Campbell in his *Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophical Movement* (1980).<sup>35</sup> Their works are more balanced because they lack the more obvious normative valuations that characterise the three earlier writers discussed. Both Goodrick-Clarke and Hanegraaff rely on Godwin’s *The Theosophical Enlightenment* for their general perspectives. Goodrick-Clarke is the most sympathetic, and can note Blavatsky’s “original insights,” which were supported by contemporary scholarly and scientific works (2004, 9). Comparing this with Lubelsky’s assessment of her works having an “irrational character,” there is no doubt that Goodrick-Clarke is more in harmony with the subject. Campbell’s work is non-judgemental, calling *Isis Unveiled* a “landmark in the history of Western occultism” and noting that it reflects the controversies of the time (1980, 32-9). He also notes, correctly, that it outlined the themes later developed in Theosophical literature. All four locate Blavatsky’s works in a stream of speculation on religion and mythology flowing from the Age of Enlightenment and the eighteenth century. This stream is well chronicled in Godwin’s work and includes writers such as Godfrey Higgins, Hargrave Jennings, and Emma Hardinge Britten, whose works have

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<sup>35</sup>Other scholars to have dealt with Theosophy and H. P. Blavatsky in a nuanced and sensitive manner include James A. Santucci in various works and Robert Ellwood (1986).

obvious similarities with Blavatsky's. I would not, however, confine her works to any one stream. H. P. Blavatsky engaged with many subject fields of the late nineteenth century. Significantly, Hanegraaff points out that many of these theories from the eighteenth century were not originally regarded as esoteric, but that as the field of religious studies professionalised in the nineteenth century they became so consigned (2013, 154, 221, 239, 254-5). Jeremy Naydler, in his *Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts* (2005) details a similar process in the field of Egyptology in the nineteenth century. The rationalization of the field entailed deliberate exclusions of perceived "esoteric" themes. Esoteric, however, is not an essential category; it is political and situational.

The consequences of a pragmatic and anti-foundationalist/anti-essentialist perspective are far reaching and require a re-reading of existing historical narratives. An undoing of previous historical assumptions, exclusions, and inclusions will become inevitable. The field will level, as normative judgements are rooted out, and marginalized perspectives from the past are allowed to take breath.

A point should be made concerning the oft-repeated charge of plagiarism against H. P. Blavatsky, which was originally raised by William Emmett Coleman in an appendix to Vsevolod Sergyeevich Solovyoff's *A Modern Priestess of Isis* (1895).<sup>36</sup> The precise details of the charges are not of central relevance to my discussion. Of interest to this study is that there are differing assessments of the charge by scholars engaging with her works. Opinions are varied and include: uncritical brief repetition (Hanegraaff 2013, 273); guilty most of the time (Lavoie 2012, 271); "not germane" (Goodrick-Clarke 2004, 52); misleading half-statement, and "par for the Nineteenth Century course" (Gomes 1994, 144, 494); legally not guilty (Erixson 2006); guilty, but her original insights not invalidated (Campbell 1980, 35); "ingenious example of plagiarism" from a "discursive point of view" (Stuckrad 2014, 98); and, essentially not guilty (Cranston 1994). The diversity of views suggests that there are various perspectives from which this issue can be approached.

In sympathy with Goodrick-Clarke, I regard the charges of plagiarism as basically irrelevant in an assessment of Blavatsky's work and ideas. The value in Coleman's review is his identification of textual sources from which she drew. It is admitted by most parties that she inadequately referenced, though a term like "borrowing" seems just as appropriate in this

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<sup>36</sup>This appendix is conveniently republished on the Theosophical oriented website, [www.blavatskyarchives.com/colemansources1895.com](http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/colemansources1895.com).

context as that of plagiarism. This is a term Blavatsky uses herself in her explanatory article, *My Books* (Blavatsky 1988c, vol. II, 50). *Isis Unveiled* can best be seen as a narrative re-working of a wide variety of ideas, primary and secondary sources, and contemporary theories. This narrative use has resulted in a new statement which demands assessment on its own terms. The claim of plagiarism based, in this instance, on such a wide variety of textual sources is also, in a sense, self-defeating. It is simply impossible for her to take ideas, sentences, or facts from so many different sources and present them all as they exist in their original settings. The narrative ordering and holistic setting which I propose here solves the problem by indicating the new environment within which statements take on new semantic value and purpose.

### 2.3) Motivation and Aim

The motivation, intent, or “aim” of an author can be difficult to ascertain. Given the consequences of the intentional fallacy, death of author narratives, implications of reader-response theories, and a pervasive Rortyan anti-essentialism the debate shifts from “correct” interpretation to use. We shift to the use that Blavatsky made of the resources available and the use that I am making of her work. Certainly, I myself read Blavatsky in a particular manner and have multiple intentions of my own. For my purposes, I see no need to go beyond the surface statements of the text.

H. P. Blavatsky reveals two recurring concerns in *Isis Unveiled*:

- 1) That the population was losing belief in ‘God’, and
- 2) The population was losing belief in personal immortality and in a life after death.

Both of these beliefs, she argues, are innate in man and she intends to restore and sustain these views (1988a, vol. I, 36, 76, 222, 467). Pels notes that these two common concerns were provoked by the new materialistic orientations which many doubted could provide a stable basis for morality in society (2008, 273). *Isis Unveiled* is a work aimed, in part, at responding to these basic concerns. These issues intersect with comparative religion through Blavatsky’s interpretation of religions to sustain her position. She hoped to accomplish this re-orientation through a “brief summary of the religions, philosophies, and universal traditions of human kind, and the exegesis of the same, in the spirit of those secret doctrines, of which none – thanks to prejudice and bigotry – have reached Christendom in so

unmutilated a form, as to secure it a fair judgement” (1988a, vol. I, xlv). She engages in the interpretation of religion to draw out the essence and the truth of religions, and shows these truths as universal, consistent, scientific, and relevant.

H. P. Blavatsky restates the fundamental ideas of *Isis Unveiled* in 10 propositions. In summary they are,

- 1) There are no miracles,
- 2) Nature is triune,
- 3) Man is triune,
- 4) Magic is a science, the knowledge of which gives a person control over nature,
- 5) True knowledge misused is ‘sorcery’, and compassionately used is ‘wisdom’,
- 6) Mediumship is different to adeptship,
- 7) The astral light contains a record of things that were, are, and will be,
- 8) The races of humanity differ both in natural properties and spiritual gifts,
- 9) The separation of the astral from the physical is possible, and
- 10) Knowledge of magnetism and electricity is one foundation of magic. (1988a, vol. II, 587-90)

Boris de Zirkoff, quoting H. P. Blavatsky from 1886, notes that she retrospectively presented the objectives of *Isis Unveiled* as being to show,

- (a) the reality of the *Occult* in nature; (b) the thorough knowledge of, and familiarity with, all such occult domains amongst ‘certain men,’ and their mastery therein; (c) hardly an art or science known in our age, that the *Vedas* have not mentioned; and (d) that hundreds of things, especially, mysteries of nature – *in abscondito* as the alchemists called it – were known to the Âryas of

the pre-*Mahâbhârata* period, which are unknown to us, the modern sages of the XIXth century. (1972, 44-5)

We are tempted to see these concerns as simply religious or theological, in opposition to scientific. This habitual classification, however, is neither explanatory nor obvious. It reifies positions of the past which were, in fact, more intertwined, unsettled, and unclear than at first appearance. To continue to simply impose a religious/scientific binary on the past is to idealise the past in a way that reinforces the assumptions of the past. Blavatsky's aims and concerns segue with the pervasive concerns in the late nineteenth century over the basis for morality.

### 3) H.P. BLAVATSKY AND INTERPRETING RELIGION

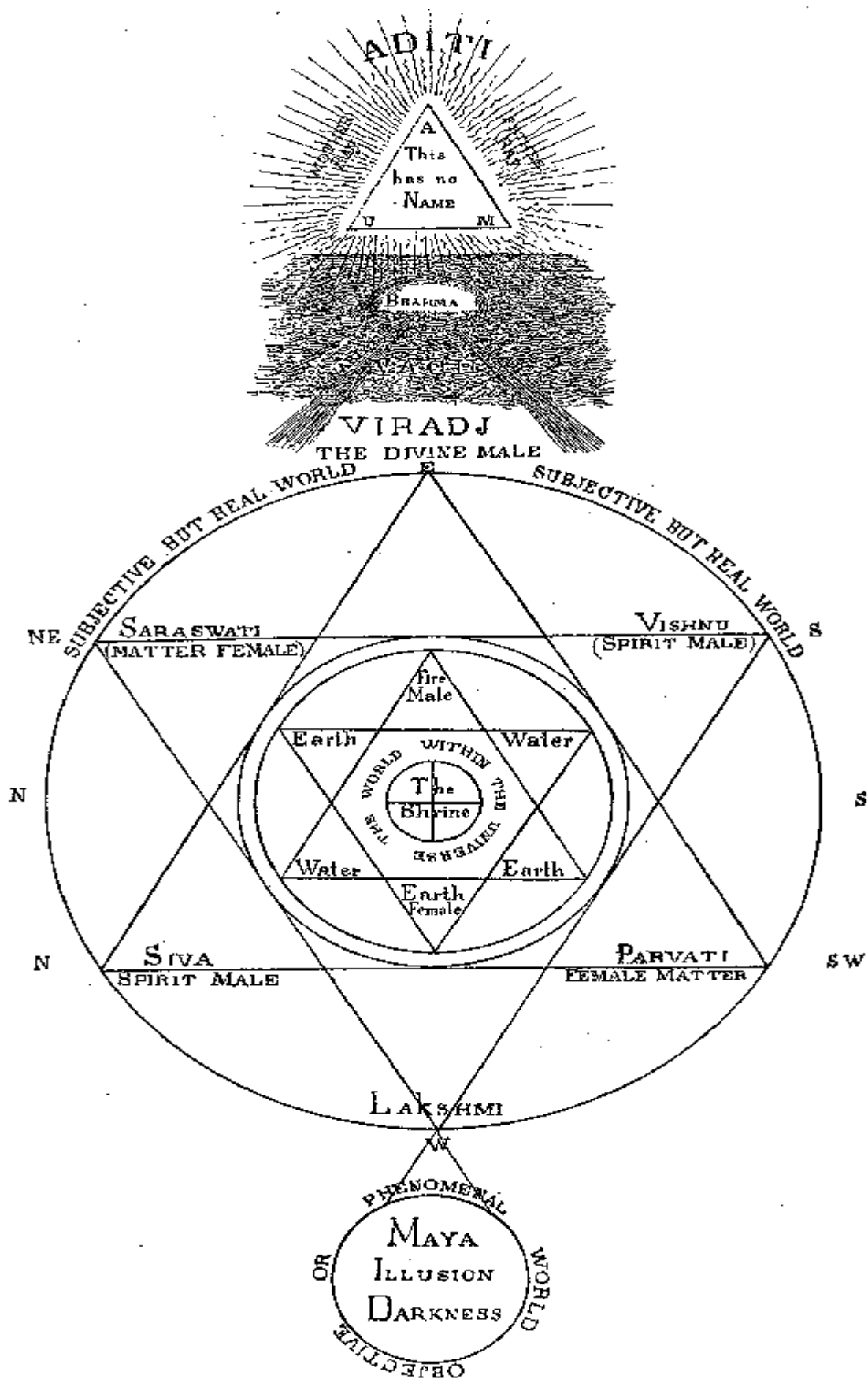
Interpreting religion and engaging in a comparative agenda requires a set of strategies and orienting conceptions leading to interpretation as both possible and inevitable. I discuss, firstly, H. P. Blavatsky's enabling assumptions that underlie her comparative method. I move then to outline her interpretive strategies as presented in *Isis Unveiled*.

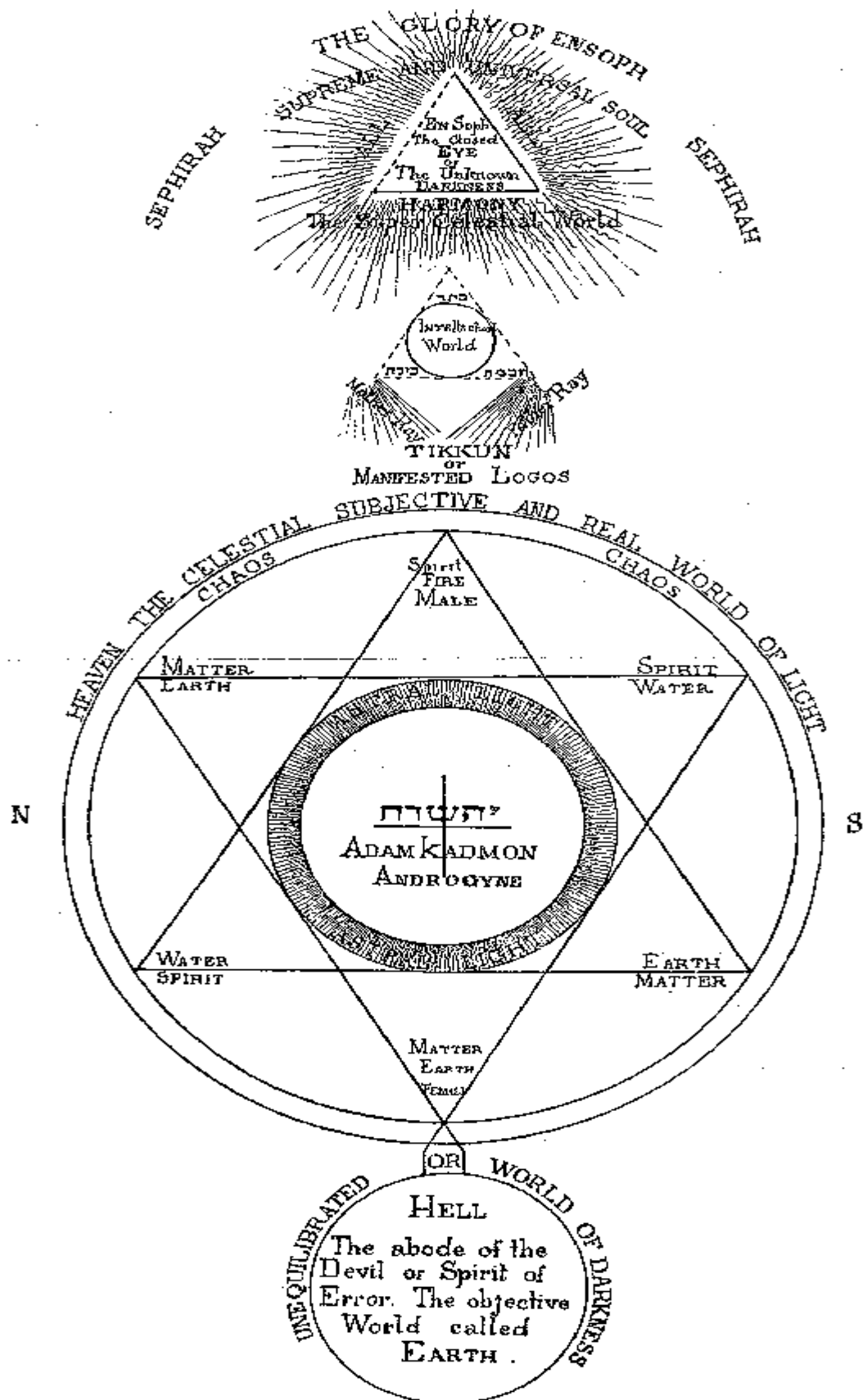
#### 3.1) Interpretive Background and Enabling Assumptions

I begin at the end. I am proposing that H. P. Blavatsky was engaged in a search for the first, original, primordial, proto-typical, and complete religion— the original pattern, the “mother-trunk”— of which historical religions are reflections or offshoots of varying completeness. Her search resulted in a diagrammatic representation of the ancient wisdom tradition, which will achieve its maturity in *The Secret Doctrine*. I will discuss the diagram as found in *The Secret Doctrine* in the following chapter. Of relevance here is that the first sketches of this diagram are found in *Isis Unveiled* (1988a, vol. II, 264-5).<sup>37</sup> From *Isis Unveiled*, I reproduce below these two anticipatory diagrams which represent the “Hindu” and “Chaldean” systems as conceived by Blavatsky:

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<sup>37</sup>In *Isis Unveiled* Blavatsky gives an additional prose description of an image in a “subterranean temple,” which appears to be similar to the one eventually presented as the final image in *The Secret Doctrine* (1988a, vol. I, 348).





I am not aware of any earlier versions of these diagrams in or out of Theosophical literature and at present I regard them as composite glyphs with elements drawn by H. P. Blavatsky from various possible sources. For example, I identify the “*Sri Yantra*” diagram in Inman’s *Ancient Faiths Embodied in Ancient Names* as sharing many unmistakable points of identity with the mid-part of her Hindu-based diagram above (1872, vol. I, 147). Establishing potential sources is, however, only partially satisfying. H. P. Blavatsky transforms what she adopts, and what on the surface may seem familiar becomes something quite different when properly situated within her larger narrative. *Urpflanze*, primordial leaf, ideal drop, original religion – these diagrams, reflecting Daston and Galison’s truth-to-nature epistemic code and later consolidated into one in *The Secret Doctrine*, are a summary of Blavatsky’s insights. In its final form in *The Secret Doctrine* it will contain in germ all her ideas on cosmogony and anthropology, and many prominent Theosophical writers succeeding her will present a version of this diagram. Whatever the metaphor we choose, whether “inserted,” “injected,” “found,” “made,” “constructed,” “drawn,” “assembled,” “distilled,” “appropriated,” or “imposed,” these diagrams are the result of Blavatsky’s meditation on religion. With this end in mind, I turn to her interpretive moves. Before detailing specific techniques of interpretation, however, I will outline some of her basic assumptions that enable her interpretative moves.

### 3.1.1) Binary Homologies

Earlier I argued that Tylor, Wallace, and H. P. Blavatsky could read the world in different ways based on their response to séance phenomena. Not simply could they read the world differently, they were, in a theoretical sense at the very least, different persons. The reality of an individual spirit associated with the human body would have resulted in a different subject position. I am not suggesting that they lived in different “worlds;” rather, I propose that the late nineteenth century could be read justifiably in different ways. These three figures existed contemporaneously in the late nineteenth century but emphasised and valued its various domains differently. Pels, discussing materiality and materialism, proposes four basic binary orientations - abstract/concrete, spiritual/material, subject/object, and culture/nature (2008, 270-2). It is the second of these which was of central concern in the nineteenth century. Philosophical nuances concerning Blavatsky’s ontological stance aside, her response to the séance phenomena embraced the vocabulary of a basic spiritual/material opposition, the



implications of which are reflected in a wide variety of related oppositions. It is difficult for us to relate to this distinction so far have we turned from it in the academic setting. Unlike today, however, in the late nineteenth century the envisioning of an immaterial, spiritual world was still a justifiable proposition upon which various positions could be based.

Flowing from the fundamental spiritual/material dyad we might tabulate some of the more important binary homologies relating to interpreting religion as they are found in *Isis Unveiled*,

Inner	Outer
Esoteric	Exoteric
Spirit/Soul	Body
Intuition	Rational/sensual
True	False
Secret/Hidden	Revealed
Ancient Wisdom Religion	Historical Religions
Esoteric dogma	Human dogma
Spirit of a text/teaching	Dead letter / literalism
Invisible	Visible
Initiate	Profane
Eternal	Temporal
Knowledge	Ignorance
Reality	Illusion
Divine	Demonic
Complete	Incomplete
Inner senses	Outer senses
Primary	Secondary

These oppositions pervade *Isis Unveiled* and lead to a basic assumption that religious texts and actions are not only open to interpretation but positively require interpretation for their

original, occluded meaning to be revealed.<sup>38</sup> This reasoning is not essentially different to a perspective in which meaning is not literal or obvious, or that a theory or methodology is required to reveal the actual meaning of a text. This assumption is, however, worked out by Blavatsky in a particular way related to the basic binary of spiritual/material which she invoked. Once the radical orientation of H. P. Blavatsky is acknowledged, we can identify the trajectory of the ideas which flowed logically and coherently from it. For example, not only did certain types of interpretive strategies become preferential, but the literary sources brought forth to support her endeavour were of a specific nature. In particular, she referenced interpretive studies which were non-materialistic in origin. In many instances these were older studies before naturalistic interpretations of religion began to proliferate during the late nineteenth century.

We recall here the sympathy between Daston and Galison's scientific "sage" of the truth-to-nature epistemic code and H. P. Blavatsky's "adept." The practical result of this is two-fold. On the one hand, it makes interpretation inevitable, while on the other it frames the nature of her interpretive strategies. Both the creating of space for interpretation and the hierarchical nature of the binaries reveal the "politics" of Blavatsky's work that will come into play. It is not simply a "politics" though, as there is no reason to suppose she did not honestly accept the reality of séance phenomena, and every reason to think she did. She will align Theosophy with the true, the real, the hidden, and the complete side of the binary, claiming the mediating centre of authority in these issues. It is important to recognize that her "esoteric" position or statement is characterised by a set content, a collection of true propositional statements. What makes a religious doctrine or statement true is whether it matches the content of the esoteric doctrine. In this sense, an esoteric doctrine may not actually be hidden from sight; it may be quite plainly stated in a religious text. It is knowledge of the esoteric statement that allows any doctrine to be evaluated.

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<sup>38</sup>See Sinha "Corrigibility, Allegory, Universality: a History of the Gita's Transnational Reception, 1785-1945" (2010) for an example of how the Theosophical Society mediated interpretive orientations toward a Hindu text.

### 3.1.2) Theosophical Ancient Wisdom Tradition

For H. P. Blavatsky there is a universal Theosophical wisdom tradition, the existence of which supplies a partial answer as to what is guiding her selection process.<sup>39</sup> She is locating and revealing this “secret doctrine” wherever it may be found. This only defers our inquiry. We seek to specify the source and content of this tradition. The wisdom tradition is made up of the term and a set of associated concepts. The source, in the sense that I mean it here, of Blavatsky’s Theosophical wisdom tradition is the composition of her own selections. That is, she is the source of her wisdom tradition. Her vision did not pre-exist her presentation of it, and did not survive her in its original form. What is the nature of this wisdom tradition, her “occult tradition”? I suggest that it is a body of truths and a recording of its movements through history. H. P. Blavatsky is “constructing a tradition” and, as Munslow suggests, this is the natural activity of history-making.

The concept and term “secret doctrine” is found throughout *Isis Unveiled*. As one example we might note, “*for the Secret Doctrine is the Truth*, and that religion is nearest divine that has contained it with least adulteration” (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. II, 292). As a second example, “This ‘secret doctrine’ contains the alpha and the omega of universal science; therein lies the corner and the keystone of all the ancient and modern knowledge; and alone in this ‘unphilosophical’ doctrine remains buried the *absolute* in the philosophy of the dark problems of life and death” (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. I, 511). Many other instances could be quoted and there are a number of related terms, including, “ancient universal religion,” “universal tradition of mankind,” “universal wisdom religion,” “divine religion,” “ancient wisdom,” “primitive source,” “primitive wisdom religion,” “primitive faith,” “ancient doctrine,” “primeval Asiatic philosophy,” and “universal doctrine.” Three special and related terms are “Magic,” “Hermetic philosophy,” and “Universal Kabala.” The latter two can be used in a dual sense as they can also refer to Hermeticism and the *Kabbalah* as historically understood. Her orientation to Magic is particularly important, bearing in mind her assessment of the séance phenomena and how this justified ancient claims of magical powers. Magic, she affirms, has an origin coincident with the “first man,” and is consequently difficult to trace; it appeared on earth with early, spiritual races of men; it can be equated with modern spiritualism and was a universal science (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. I, 18-9, 35, 40, 247).

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<sup>39</sup>I insert the word “Theosophical” here to make the point that I do not want to conflate H. P. Blavatsky’s conception with any diachronic based essentialist notions or scholarly constructs of “a” or “the” wisdom tradition or perennial philosophy. This point should be kept in mind throughout the thesis.

Tellingly, Blavatsky also referred to magic as being “occult psychology,” which linked it to a field of nineteenth century knowledge which she, and others, believed held promise (1988a, vol. I, 612). This “esoteric tradition” was the “mother trunk” of both pre-historic Buddhism and (Pre-Vedic) Brahmanism, from which world religions are derived (1988a, vol. II, 639). It is the “parent cult”, the “prototype,” from which historical religions spring (1988a, vol. II, 216). The doctrines of the original source are the standard by which religions (religious statements) are to be measured (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. II, 2). The existence of this primordial prototype, the first and original religion as a body of truths, poses the question of its origin and spread. H.P. Blavatsky pursues these questions in a variety of ways, which I now outline.

### 3.1.3) Origins and Beginnings– Diffusion and Psychology

Michael Stausberg suggests that a theory of religion could be expected to respond to four areas of inquiry, the specificity of religion, the origin of religion, the function of religion, and the structure of religion (2009, 1-21). Almost inevitably, he concedes that many theories of religion do not cover these four aspects, which suggests that for something to be regarded as a theory of religion it need not, in fact, deal with all four points (2009, 6). Here I outline H. P. Blavatsky’s theory of the origin of religion as presented in *Isis Unveiled*. Stausberg astutely highlights the difference between the origin of religion and the beginning of a religion, and we pose the basic question: What is the origin and beginning of the wisdom religion and of the various historical religions? When, for example, Buddhism historically began – the beginning – is a different question to what the conditions may be for the arising or origin of religion as a cultural phenomenon. In Blavatsky’s conception the origins and beginnings of religion appear to merge into one another once the idea of knowledge descending from higher beings is conceded. We might begin with an understanding of what “religion” is for H. P. Blavatsky.

I have proposed that the simplest way to conceptualise the category “religion” in *Isis Unveiled* is as a body of factual and propositional statements about nature and humanity. Religion, then, is divided into “esoteric” and “exoteric” categories. Esoteric religion is the “Truth,” and is conceived of as a body of true propositional statements. The “Truth” is the way nature actually works, the history of life on earth, and what the fullness of being human actually entails. It encompasses, then, the “laws of nature” and the proper description of being fully human as having a body, soul, and spirit. Referencing later Theosophy, the

important Theosophist, Boris de Zirkoff, can speak of Theosophy as “Truth, though expressed in human language, however inadequate it may be” (1983, 37). In *Isis Unveiled* Blavatsky does note that language may change over time, complicating interpretation, and that language may be inadequate for expressing certain truths (1988a, vol. I, 37, 308). Neither of these promising semantic insights is followed through on and they function simply as entry points for her own perspectives to be presented. For H. P. Blavatsky, ancient religions were more in harmony with nature, were “taught,” and were based on a proper understanding of the occult powers of humanity. They were also the fruit of the highest philosophical speculations (1988a, vol. I, 25, 38, 567; vol. II, 70). She suggests that “true philosophy” and “divine truth” are synonyms, and true religion is based on these foundations (1988a, vol. II, 121). Not essential to “true religion” are ceremonialism, fetish worship, superstition, and “vain human dogmas” (1988a, vol. II, 41, 81). These truths are the result of experience and investigation, of scientific endeavour. Fundamental, then, to her theory is the idea that every religion has an esoteric and exoteric aspect. So fundamental is this notion in *Isis Unveiled* that I feel there is no need to reference it. Esoteric religion is the body of true statements, while exoteric religion is, for a variety of reasons both positive and negative, a falling away from this.<sup>40</sup> In *Isis Unveiled*, esoteric also conveys a sense of being “restricted.” This body of truths is withheld from certain people (the masses) by a limited group of people (initiates). Restriction carries various senses:

- Geographical restriction – truths in the East not the West.
- Physical restriction in terms of personal distance from remote initiates and teachers.
- Physical restriction in terms of lack of access to occult texts.<sup>41</sup>
- Interpretive restriction in terms of a hidden meaning in religious texts.
- Psychological restrictions in terms of those individuals unable to awaken their innate intuitive capacities – including varying evolutionary rankings of races.
- Educational and cultural restriction in terms of a lack of inherited knowledge or educational preparation in these truths.

The notion of “restricted knowledge,” a term I have adopted from the Egyptologist John Baines, is linked to a hierarchical structuring of society or of the group under review (Baines

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<sup>40</sup>This interpretation is reflected in, for example, G. de Purucker’s *Occult Glossary*, see entries for “esoteric doctrine,” and “exoteric.”

<sup>41</sup>Despite H. P. Blavatsky stating in *Isis Unveiled* that the esoteric doctrines were never committed to writing and were transmitted orally, the idea of written occult texts pervades her writings as they develop (1988a, vol. I, 271).

1990). Certainly, the early Theosophical Society was a hierarchical organisation with its three degrees of membership and certain restricted teachings being confined to the members of the Esoteric Section and the Inner Group. Esoteric knowledge was reserved for the few in the Theosophical Society, as it was in Blavatsky's reading of history and religion.

In terms of the origin of religion as a cultural phenomenon of humanity, H. P. Blavatsky is clear. The need for religion – the truths of religion – is innate in every human being. This need is built on an individual's intuitive and instinctive knowledge of two principles, that "God" exists, and that the human being is immortal.<sup>42</sup> These two principles are the foundation of all religions, and any religion must satisfy this "craving" to be regarded as properly functioning (1988a, vol. I, 76; vol. II, 124). No "creed, no false philosophy, no religious exaggerations, could ever destroy that feeling" (1988a, vol. II, 121). Among the binaries Blavatsky repeatedly invokes is that between spiritual and physical man, which indicates for her a distinction between intuitive knowledge and rational/sensual speculation. This is further expressed as a difference between reason as the "eye of the mind," and intuition as the "eye of the soul" (1988a, vol. I, 16). The origin of religion, then, is based on every human being's innate unconscious or conscious knowledge of the reality of "God" and of the immortality of the individual. It is a yearning for the truth of nature and the human being.

This knowledge, universal in testimony according to H. P. Blavatsky, is rooted in the idea that the human soul is in natural communion with the inner worlds. A loss of this knowledge signals a descent, while a regaining of this knowledge, through initiation, evolution, philosophy, science, or otherwise, signals an ascent. I suggest, then, that Blavatsky presents a *psychological* – "psycho-spiritual" in her conception – theory for the origin for religion. Her position is based on two perspectives. The first is a particular anthropology, a three-fold understanding of the human being as body, soul, and spirit, which was itself underpinned by her reading of the spiritualistic phenomena. The second is her understanding of the evolutionary origin of humanity, to which I now turn. At issue here is the question: Why is a particular knowledge universally innate in every individual? We shall see how the answer to this coalesces into the beginnings of the ancient wisdom tradition and of the various historical religions.

Having declared the existence of an ancient wisdom tradition, conceived of as a body of true statements about humanity and nature that is complete in the beginning though variously

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<sup>42</sup>I place the word "God" in inverted commas due to the complexity of its use and meaning in *Isis Unveiled*.

expressed in different times by different groups, Blavatsky must then outline its beginning and spread. She does not do this in any consistent or focused manner, and we must extract various statements in an attempt to reconstruct the flow of her narrative. In my reading of *Isis Unveiled*, the beginnings of religion can be explained in terms of a theory of *diffusion*. Both the psychological and diffusionistic themes are rooted in her conception of the individual as a spiritual and physical entity. This is in turn premised upon, among other things, her acceptance of spiritualistic phenomena as real and on her reading of ancient philosophy and religion. We might recall at this point that I am arguing that the existence of spiritualistic phenomena in the late nineteenth century gave material support to the idea of a separate soul linked to the physical body which, in turn, underscored Blavatsky's reading of religion. In fact, I do not require this link to propose my reading of her work. *Isis Unveiled* can be viewed simply as Blavatsky's interpretation of religions, ancient and modern, which traditions, in her understanding, included a body-soul distinction in their teachings. I feel, however, that she was rooted in the various knowledge streams of her time and made use of them in her engagement with religion.

I note a few orienting positions. Firstly, Blavatsky suggests that primitive/savage peoples existed simultaneously with civilized peoples in all ages (1988a, vol. I, 4). She does not accept the progressive evolutionary model of: heathen/pagan to Christianity to science, proposing instead a cyclic view of history, and a conception that "humanity" cannot emerge from "animal brutality" (1988a, vol. I, ix, 4). We notice that she does not reject the primitive/civilized distinction. Instead, she appears to challenge the idea that "civilization" could grow from a lower level of development. Secondly, she posits an immaterial existence of primordial humanity before a material/physical existence (1988a, vol. I, 149, 293, 295; vol. II, 276). Thirdly, she links the ancient wisdom tradition to the concept of magic, to the point that they become synonymous (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. I, 18, 24). Magic she defines as "spiritual wisdom" (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. II, 590). This link to magic—we might read here as including the "occult sciences" of the nineteenth century—is important, as she suggests that magical powers, and the religious texts (including mantric texts) propounding them, are ignored and ridiculed by the scholars of her day (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. I, 64; vol. II, 409). For Blavatsky the reality of the séance and spiritualistic phenomena legitimised a reading of ancient claims to the reality of supernatural powers. She remarks, "If the narratives of Owen and Hare, of Edmonds, and Crookes, and Wallace are credible, why not those of Herodotus,

the ‘Father of History’, of Iamblichus, and Porphyry, and hundreds of other ancient authors” (1988a, vol. I, 334)?

On the question of ultimate beginnings, Blavatsky proposes no definitive answer. Magic is coeval with humanity and, like humanity, has an origin which cannot be uncovered. Understanding the wisdom tradition as purest in the beginning and degenerating with time, she looks to the earliest sources and earliest humanity for the clearest expressions of that tradition (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. I, 19, 25). The more ancient a claim for a text the more it is prized. We could, with some justification, reverse this formula, the more a text or concept is prized (based on the accessibility of the Theosophical truths) the more ancient it is for her.<sup>43</sup> It should also be noted that every new religion, if founded by an initiate, as many were in her view, is also based on a portion of the complete wisdom tradition. If ultimate beginnings are lost to us, broad historical beginnings are not. Blavatsky too consistently points to the East as the historical origin of religions to doubt her opinion on this point. She refers to the “sages of the Orient” (1988a, vol. I, vi); proposes the source of the secret doctrine in India and Turkestan (1988a, vol. I, 135-36); presents a progression from the East (pre-Vedic India) to Egypt to Greece to Rome (1988a, vol. I, 589); and identifies India as the “*Alma-Mater*” of civilization, arts, sciences and religion (1988a, vol. II, 30). She further finds the Mysteries and the first traces of the wisdom religion in pre-Vedic India (1988a, vol. II, 39, 98), traces the source of the secret doctrine to “both sides of the Himalayas,” and quite clearly states that Egypt owes its knowledge to “pre-Vedic India” (1988a, vol. II, 361). Blavatsky holds that there is a “transcendental philosophy of Oriental *Gnosis*,” a “primeval Asiatic philosophy,” which is the origin of later developments (1988a, vol. II, 192, 205). Expanding the notion of the *Kabbalah* from a Judaic setting, she refers to the “oldest oriental *Kabala*” (1988a, vol. II, 212). She suggested that the East had answers to scientific problems (1988a, vol. I, xlv) and lauded the knowledge of the Brahmans and Gautama Buddha (1988a, vol. I, 442). Finally, she argues that the key to later religions is to be found in Hindu texts and refers to scholars who she feels support her, including, Burnouf, Colebrooke, Inman, King, Jacolliot, and “other Orientalists” (1988a, vol. II, 227, 259).

In one instance she hints at beginnings upon which she will elaborate in the *Secret Doctrine*. She writes,

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<sup>43</sup>Her misreading of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* as representing the oldest strands of thought in Ancient Egypt instead of the later speculations as now thought is an example of this. Her ideas on Ancient Egypt, however, need to be carefully historically located for a reliable assessment to be made (Bester 2012, 65-69).



To continue the tradition, we have to add that the class of hierophants was divided into two distinct categories: those who were instructed by the “Sons of God,” of the island, and who were initiated in the divine doctrine of pure revelation, and others who inhabited the lost Atlantis – if such must be its name – and who, being of another race, were born with a sight which embraced all hidden things, and was independent of both distance and material obstacle. (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. I, 592-3)

In this passage she introduces both *Shambala* (unnamed) and Atlantis as originating places for the wisdom tradition. We must stress two ideas due to the fact that they are elaborated on in the *Secret Doctrine*. The first is that primordial, original humanity was non-physical in nature and gradually descended into physicality with an attendant loss of intuitive spiritual knowledge. Secondly, in a few places, H. P. Blavatsky refers to “instructors” of early humanity who are also sometimes referred to as *pitris* (1988a, vol. II, 107, 114). The various classes of these ancestors of humanity form a central theme in her later works.

For Blavatsky, both the esoteric wisdom tradition and the historical religions traverse history and the world through what I have labelled a *diffusionism* and *psychological* theory of origins. The simplest way to track the origin of religion is to regard the wisdom tradition as a body of truths about humanity and nature. It is an objective description of reality as it is and as such the same throughout history when faithfully presented. The ancient wisdom tradition is the source of the historical religions, which evolve from it as either degenerate versions or as local adaptations to suit individual circumstances. With exact beginnings lost to the past it is carried through history and geography by the Mysteries and through Initiations. This complete knowledge is carried by chosen initiates and secret schools in a pure form. The wisdom religion, as a body of truths about the world, has the following potential beginnings. Firstly, it was given to an early humanity by higher beings. Secondly, these truths have been carried secretly through history and civilization through oral traditions and mystery schools. These truths are periodically released into the world through the founders of new religions, most, if not all, of whom were initiates of varying degrees. Thirdly, individuals, through purity and honest scientific research, can uncover these truths to various degrees. Fourthly, certain individuals can contact higher beings at any point and, under certain specific conditions, acquire aspects of these wisdom truths. Lastly, the knowledge of certain truths is simply innate in the human being.

For the sake of completeness, I identify a seemingly anomalous counter-narrative in H. P. Blavatsky’s works relating to the origin and beginnings of religion. While on the one hand

Blavatsky looks backward in time for the complete wisdom tradition, on the other hand she writes that the “marvellous perfection” (of the wisdom tradition) could only have been attained after a “succession of ages;” it is the fruit of no single generation or epoch; “Facts were piled upon facts,” “deduction upon deduction,” and “science upon science” (1988a, vol. II, 99). Reflecting the methods of the natural sciences, knowledge is portrayed as being cumulative. Certainly this position has echoes *The Secret Doctrine*, where the Theosophical truths are the “Accumulated wisdom of the Ages.” Elsewhere Blavatsky can refer to a “reform” of the wisdom tradition by *Tsongkapa*. There are various ways to resolve this dichotomy, however, and in principle what I believe is indicated is that Blavatsky is caught between two competing discourses. She is trying to link the scientific discourse of knowledge accumulation through experiment and testing with her ancient wisdom tradition notion of a handing down of knowledge from superior beings in the distant past.

I conclude this short section with an observation. What is it that consigns H. P. Blavatsky’s speculations above to the “esoteric” and “occult” sphere? Many of the themes raised, issues discussed, and positions taken were integral parts of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectual debates. The primacy of *Sanskrit* as a parent language and an Indian origin of religion, the search for cultural origins in Central Asia and India, the debates over whether Egypt and the earliest religion was originally monotheistic or polytheistic, the search for an ur-tradition, the idea that emanation and transmigration were intrinsic features of an oriental doctrine, a hidden esoteric knowledge for elites and common exoteric knowledge for the masses, all these were basic positions of European speculation at different points in time, as they were for H. P. Blavatsky (Manuel 1967; Bernal 1991; App 2010). I suggest that Blavatsky reflected and participated in the general debates of the late nineteenth century. The “colouring” of her works with descriptive terms like “esoteric” and “occult” is a distancing technique which, in effect, excludes and separates them from their historical place.

#### 3.1.4) De-contextualising and Re-contextualising

H. P. Blavatsky’s work involves a radical de-contextualising of ideas, statements, doctrines, teachings, and individual sentences from the sources in which they are found. This is true of both primary religious texts, scientific works, and of the secondary literature with which she engages. Such radical de-contextualising is a re-contextualising of the isolated elements into her Theosophical whole. With her insight into the parameters of truth shining through the

dross, she wrenches this truth from religious, philosophical, and scientific texts. The large number of texts she quotes, whether on a second-hand basis or not, suggests that she feels no need to engage with a specific text in its entirety.<sup>44</sup> The important question to ask in this context is: what is guiding her selection? In the *Secret Doctrine* the same question can be posed, but the answer is apparent in that work. The mature Theosophical system, vocabulary, and language are in place by the writing of the *Secret Doctrine* (1888) and it is this pattern or grid which guides her selections. In 1877, with *Isis Unveiled*, this is not yet fully the case and the Theosophical terminology is not yet established.

Richard Rorty's re-description and recontextualising, Gavin Flood's notion of narrative in both the emic and etic description of religion, and Munslow's narrative selection in the making of history all suggest that re-contextualising is an ordinary part of intellectual activity. The notion of narrative cuts deep. Not only am I, as a scholar, selecting and narrating, but we must admit that Blavatsky was involved in the same activity. Furthermore, we must acknowledge that the sources H. P. Blavatsky drew on were also weaving narratives and assembling stories. We should not look for the "true" story as a foundation; instead, we should embrace well-designed narratives in the hope and expectation that they may broaden our horizons. We are obliged to also admit that there is rarely a single narrative and that in any period there are competing narratives, each potentially justifiable. A specific advantage of a narrative view of history is that it provides an explanation for semantic shifts in words and concepts. As ideas and terms are extracted from a particular narrative, they are plotted in a new holistic presentation and obtain new semantic value. Blavatsky is conscious that she uses terms outside of their more traditional meaning contexts (Bester 2012, 110).

Gavin Flood invokes the concept of insider and outsider perspectives on religion as competing narratives. Both are situated, contextual, and work within the prescribed rules of their individual communities. He can note that "religion" can be seen as a "cultural text" with boundaries defined by set and identifying narratives (Flood 1999, 121). He further argues that rationality is a function of the larger narrative of the tradition within which one acts, be it a religious tradition or a scientific community (1999, 140-41). This, however, is not the basis of my argument for the inclusion of H. P. Blavatsky in the larger field of the history of comparative religion. Firstly, there was no firmly established Theosophical tradition at the writing of *Isis Unveiled*. *Isis Unveiled* becomes one of the pillars of this tradition, and its

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<sup>44</sup>Sustained engagement with a single text is, however, not entirely unknown and H. P. Blavatsky produced a detailed commentary on the first book of the *Pistis Sophia* (Blavatsky 1982, 1-81).

rationality or otherwise cannot be situated in a tradition not yet formed. Blavatsky's works are understandable and interpretable in terms of the broader concerns of the late nineteenth century. Secondly, I am arguing that to broadly categorise Blavatsky's works as "religious" ignores the larger debates within the late nineteenth century about where the boundaries between science and religion lay. I see no reason, therefore, to assign value to her writings based on an idea that she wrote "religious" literature. Blavatsky's works specifically challenge the now largely accepted boundaries between science, religion, and history. She accomplishes this by situating her works within the nineteenth-century debates of these fields, fields which were undergoing processes of intense boundary work. Referencing Donald Davidson and his rejection of the third dogma of empiricism, I suggest that Blavatsky was describing and working within the same world as every other actor in the late nineteenth century. Her historical context is surely the whole nineteenth century, with all its constructions, ambiguities, contradictions, and retrospective teleological interpretations. A review of her references reveals an interest in various fields, scholarly and otherwise. They are not confined to "occult" or "esoteric" literature, though clearly she had seen value in these. We remain with the dilemma of a certain vocabulary H. P. Blavatsky adopts, for example, that she was "initiated" into an ancient wisdom tradition.<sup>45</sup> She then presented studies that reveal this tradition in historical works, philosophical texts, and religious literature. This claim is either true or, if it is not true, we must infer that Blavatsky's works are the result of her own rational inquiry and research. In the latter case, her ideas must stand on their inherent value to the debates at hand. This is to ask the basic question, has H. P. Blavatsky presented a coherent theory of religion which is justifiable in its historical context? The answer I am proposing is, yes, she has.

I am not suggesting that H. P. Blavatsky's works are not subject to simple error, poor philosophical judgement, misreading, anachronism, parochialism, notions of trans-historical truths and ideas, reification of ideas, subjective assumptions, the creation of ideal types at the expense of historical specificity, "reading between the lines," insufficient contextualising, lack of interest in an author's intention, and many additional failings. Surely, she is guilty of

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<sup>45</sup>While universities may drop terms like "initiation," there is a similarity in being instructed in higher education, for example, the application of a theory of religion which unlocks the "true" meaning of religion which is not apparent to those outside the academy. Ironically, Josephson has noted that Max Müller recognized this similarity himself (Josephson 2013, 322). This is also a point made by Baines in his discussion of "restricted knowledge" in the academic field of Egyptology (1990, 1-23). It is of interest here that the concepts of "esotericism", "initiation", and "emancipatory knowledge" have been invoked in contemporary sociology of education (Beck 2013, 186-190). There is, in general, a functional and rhetorical equivalency between appeals to professionalism and esotericism.

many of these shortcomings. I have taken this list from Quentin Skinner's "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas" (1969, 3-53). Quentin Skinner was not addressing H. P. Blavatsky, but his own contemporary academic scholars and those in the generations immediately preceding him. The same critical point could be made in specific relation to the nineteenth-century theorists of religion. E. E. Evan-Pritchard reviewed the shortcomings of many early theories of religion, including those of the "comparative method" invoked in defence of these theories (1965, 1-19). He was, however, not critiquing H. P. Blavatsky. His attention was focused on his own academic lineage. Blavatsky's works will show many of the same faults and strengths. This is one of the central themes I have tried to emphasise. H. P. Blavatsky engaged in the same debates as other notable scholars of religion, and her works reflect many of the same errors and strengths as other studies of the day.

### 3.1.5) Religion as Science and a Body of Propositional Statements

H. P. Blavatsky tips her hand on a number of issues related to science in the following passage, which I quote in full,

Toward science as a whole, as a divine goal, the whole civilized world ought to look with respect and veneration; for science alone can enable man to understand the Deity by the true appreciation of his works. "Science *is the understanding of truth or facts*," says Webster; "it is an investigation of truth *for its own sake* and a pursuit of pure knowledge." If the definition be correct, then the majority of our modern scholars have proved false to their goddess. "Truth for its own sake!" And where should the keys to every truth in nature be searched for, unless in the hitherto unexplored mystery of psychology? Alas! that in questioning nature so many men of science should daintily sort over her facts and choose only such for study as best bolster their prejudices (1988a, vol. I, 88).

H. P. Blavatsky fairly reflects Webster's definition of "science," and I propose that the best way to contextualise this passage of hers is in relation to her reading of the spiritualist phenomena as evidence for an invisible world populated by various intelligences, and of an immaterial aspect of the human constitution (Webster 1865, 1180). Her position is rooted in an understanding of the human being, in an anthropology, which simply does not allow for a purely materialistic conception of any subject. Materialistic scientists have, therefore, "daintily" selected positions which their materialism allows. This passage reveals: the

prestige of science that H. P. Blavatsky hoped to appropriate; the problematic areas under contestation within science, in particular psychology; an appeal to “truth” and the “facts,” and that honest science can guarantee its truths.<sup>46</sup>

While H. P. Blavatsky may reveal a naive understanding of science, it is no more naive than many mid- to late nineteenth-century conceptions. Once one accepts the emergent scientific status of séance phenomena one's entire reading of the late nineteenth century will be affected. Science, for her, is both a method and the fruit of the method, a body of factual statements about nature and humanity. Discussing spiritualism's shortcomings in attempting to be scientific, and apparently referencing Tyndall, Blavatsky outlines her understanding of the scientific method. Science involves the “observation of facts,” “induction of laws from these facts,” and “verification of those laws by constant practical experience” (1988a, vol. II, 637).<sup>47</sup> The result of the method is a body of true statements about nature, history, and the human being. We, of course, no longer see science as a body of eternal truths, but this has not always been the case. I draw a statement from Charles Singer's *A Short History of Scientific Ideas to 1900*, where he notes, “Science is often conceived as a *body of knowledge*. Reflection, however, will lead to the conclusion that this cannot be its true nature” [Italics in the original] (1959, 1). Who was the target of the statement? H. P. Blavatsky? We presume not. There is no need to go sixty years back for such a conception of science. Richard P. Feynman, discussing the nature of science, notes, “Sometimes it means the body of knowledge arising from the things found out” (1999, 5). Where I, perhaps, differ from some academic commentators on Theosophy is that I suggest that her position is not an unjustified or illegitimate appropriations of science or some version of “scientism;” rather, her position is one of those possible within the realm of scientific thought and speculation of the late nineteenth century.

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<sup>46</sup>Part of the appeal of a tradition like Buddhism to H. P. Blavatsky, and to many in our contemporary society, is its seeming potential compatibility with the field of psychology.

<sup>47</sup>I have found H. P. Blavatsky's conception of the “scientific method” in *Isis Unveiled* complicated to follow. Outlining how spiritualism might achieve a scientific status she presented the inductive method as the one to follow (1988a, vol. II, 637). Earlier in *Isis Unveiled* she has, however, rejected induction as a “defective method or reasoning” in favour of a “Platonic division of causes” (1988a, vol. I, 393, 513). Clearly, though, she does feel the body of universal truths she presents are founded on experiment and observation and on an “immense accumulation of facts” (1988a, vol. I, 613). I cannot propose a solution here, but, I suspect that the solution to her position may lie in the repercussions of the “higher human senses” as intimated by the séance and spiritualist phenomena. As the five known senses embrace the physical world, so do the “higher” senses embrace the spiritual world. Though he does not state it in these terms, I believe this is the implication of John Walliss's notion of how spiritualism attempted to open the spiritual worlds to scientific research (Walliss 2006, 32-43). Essentially, Blavatsky projects an empiricism and epistemic rationality explicit in the nineteenth century onto the inner worlds.

For Blavatsky, the ancient wisdom is a body of truths about nature and humanity. On the very first page of the Preface to *Isis Unveiled* she writes, “TRUTH, high-seated upon its rock of adamant, is alone eternal and supreme” (1988a, vol. I, v). The notion of “truth” is important to H. P. Blavatsky and it is repeated throughout the work in relation to the “secret doctrine” and the “ancient wisdom tradition.” Truth and “real knowledge,” or “facts,” concerning the immutable and eternal laws of nature are constant and invariable. A teaching which is true is always true, as the laws of nature are constant (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. I, 334). Truth appears to be a set of doctrines and teachings on various, perhaps all, topics. Truth remains “one,” that is, it is objective, and there is only one truth (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. I, 467; vol. II, 635). These truths concern the nature of the world and humanity. Objective truth being established, H. P. Blavatsky links it to the “secret doctrine, which is the truth” (1988a, vol. I, 574). She writes, “*for the Secret Doctrine is the Truth*, and that religion is the nearest divine that has contained it with least adulteration” (Blavatsky 1998a, vol. II, 292).

From this we can appreciate that for Blavatsky an apprehension of unmediated reality is a possibility for humanity. That “the Truth” can be known is reflected in her reading of Plato. She notes that an aspect of the individual was “kindred” or “homogenous” with Divinity and was “capable of beholding the eternal realities” (1988a, vol. I, xiii). In a word for word unreferenced extraction from Cocker’s *Christianity and Greek Philosophy* (1870) – who in turn appears to be quoting without reference – she quotes, “The human mind has, under the necessary operation of its own laws, been compelled to entertain the same fundamental ideas, and the human heart to cherish the same feelings in all ages” (1988a, vol. I, xv; Cocker 1870, 297).

H. P. Blavatsky, in her work, is revealing the truth of reality as it actually is.<sup>48</sup> All this referencing of “truth,” “dogma,” and “objectivity” in Blavatsky’s works is jarring to us. It is sometime since these words were used in academic scholarship in the uncritical manner of *Isis Unveiled*. This should not, however, blind us to the fact that Blavatsky was a child of her time. We need to attempt to recapture the habits of the past in order to better understand her behaviour, and a reading of Houghton’s chapter on “Dogmatism” in his *The Victorian Frame*

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<sup>48</sup>I challenge studies which argue that H. P. Blavatsky made deliberate and conscious use of “poetic metaphors” in order to awaken the “intuitive” faculties in an individual, or those which pose her “esoteric language as poetics” and as being deliberately unclear in order to increase authority (Algeo 1988, 4; Algeo 2010; Gunn 2002, 193-227). That Blavatsky’s statements are intentionally metaphorically poetic is a different claim from the quite useful observation that Theosophical language, like all language, is inevitably and inherently metaphorical (Sørensen 1999-2000, 229-31).

*of Mind* reveals that her vocabulary, tone, and attitude were not out of place in the Victorian era (1975, 137-60).

Reflecting her anthropology, H. P. Blavatsky presents a polarity of intuition (the “divine outcome of our inner-self”) and reason. This distinction is reflected in various ways – inner senses/outer senses, instinct/reason, and intuition/rationality. This binary reflects the others of her position, for example, “divine” religion/“human” religion, and spiritual/sensual-material. Reason is “purely human” and misapplied can lead to dogmatic religions, while instinct or intuition is rooted in the spiritual part of a person and nature and is the spontaneous recognition of the truth of things. This intuitional feeling is inherent in humanity and has been lost for a number of reasons. Firstly, humanity has entered the bottom of a cycle, that is, has entered a material period of a cycle. This has dulled the innate spiritual senses of humanity. Secondly, civilization itself in some way closes off access to the inner senses. Thirdly, soulless reasoning “stifles” humanities spiritual senses (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. I, 145, 247). All this can be viewed as the logical consequences of her particular conception of the human subject. The human being, and nature itself, is triple-fold and poses a basic material and spiritual binary. This “Truth,” the “secret doctrine” now revealed, as a body of facts about nature and humanity, is “found on an immense accumulation of facts” (1988a, vol. I, 612). Enhancing this basic duality, she refers to the “spirit of the teachings” as being opposed to the words in a book (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. I, 291, 308). This concept will inevitably link to a notion of “keys,” which are required to access the truths hidden in ancient texts and teachings. By creating a space between meaning and expression, between intention and word, she opens a gap which allows for interpretation. A space is now available for the insertion of her ideas and perspective. Still rooted in her basic binary of spiritual/material she lauds the initiate (and theurgist) over the uninitiated. A theurgist is someone who has “awakened the inner senses” common to humanity. Early humanity (or portions of it), being innately of a more spiritual type, and initiates into the mysteries, have the capacity to see things as they are and to recapture the truth of nature and humanity. Their innate intuitional capabilities allow them a spontaneous grasp of things as they are, of the truth of things.

We must be cautious here: *Isis Unveiled* is a polemical and rhetorical work, produced to persuade through logical argument. Adopting a scientific discourse, she suggests that knowledge is found through experiment, reason, and experience (her own, of her contemporaries, and of the ancients). *Isis Unveiled* is intended for the “logician, the investigator, the dauntless explorer,” and I argue that the work is a rational, literary, and



rhetorical production which aims to present a position and to persuade the reader into accepting it. There is little in *Isis Unveiled* which we cannot understand, though there might be much that we cannot accept. A doctrine of “emanations” does not require special insight, a mystical non-rational consciousness, or some Gnostic experience in order to understand its general character, while, in H. P. Blavatsky’s mind, this may be required to accept it as “the truth” (Bester 2012, 52-3; Stuckrad 2014, 98). The innate intuition for truth that she refers to is evidenced by the acceptance of a set of ideas which she designates as the “secret doctrine” and which is the truth of nature and humanity.

Anticipating hostility to her work, H. P. Blavatsky notes that truth is something which needs nurturing and preparation, its positive reception is not guaranteed in a “materialistic” atmosphere. In this we would likely agree with her. The underlying assumptions or paradigms of a culture would in part determine what is allowed or sanctioned as knowledge. As scientific naturalism and materialistic philosophies and sciences began to dominate, so proportionally would diminish the respectability of dualistic perspectives such as hers. The door on the “other world” had, however, not yet quite closed, and, in fact, appeared to many to be opening.

### 3.2) Supporting Interpretive Strategies

H. P. Blavatsky proposes a “secret doctrine,” a body of true statements concerning the true nature of the world and of humanity. This secret doctrine is, perhaps, known in varying degrees by different cultures and individuals, but it is a body of objective statements, facts, and truths about nature and humanity. In addition to this, I am arguing that this body of statements has been diagrammatised by her. This picture is shorthand for the structure she saw displayed in the religions of the world. The diagrammatic structure and the body of statements are, then, two ways of representing the same Theosophical truths. We have, therefore, three pillars basic to her interpretive engagement: the underlying structural pattern, the body of truths about the world, and the supporting techniques of interpretation invoked. We confront two issues at this point. These are the nature of the complete, original religion and the extent to which its parameters were known by Blavatsky in 1877 and, the techniques she invoked to read the body of Theosophical facts into the religious traditions of the world.

Referencing the substance, the content, of her work I have proposed that it is in *The Secret Doctrine* that her mature thoughts are definitively declared. It is in this work that the content, the structure, and the vocabulary are drawn together into a holistic system. There is, then, an evolution in her work. For example, the marginal place of *karma* in *Isis Unveiled* does not reflect the centrality of this concept in *The Secret Doctrine*. A second example of this evolution is shown in the lack of a developed seven-fold human constitution in *Isis Unveiled*. To respond to my first point above, the nature of the complete and original religion is the totality of H. P. Blavatsky's statements on nature, history, and humanity. Whatever the nature of this totality is, with all its possible ambiguities, contradictions, and shortcomings, this body of statements is the secret doctrine as it stands in 1877. In 1888, following developments, amplifications, additions, and subtractions, this body of truths will be restated in *The Secret Doctrine*. It is these truths that Blavatsky will look for in religious texts, and this seeking is her interpretive enterprise, which is supported by a number of strategies. To restate this, we might ask ourselves: How is a statement in a religious text turned into a Theosophical truth?

Underlying the interpretive engagement is an organising structural pattern, which itself is unfolding and evolving. This type form is supported by a number of subsidiary or supporting techniques deployed by H. P. Blavatsky. These include: a functional assessment; a ranking of religions; allegory; analogy; symbolism; parable and metaphor; equivalencies/synonyms; fables, magic, and myth as science; keys; blinds; emblematical devices and peculiar phraseology of the ancients; philological speculations; gods as personified powers of nature; a universal solar worship; zodiacal symbolism and Sabeism; euhemerism; reflex images of human types; arguments against anthropomorphism; a microcosm/macrocosm sympathy; number symbolism; and literalism. All these strategies and techniques are aimed at accomplishing an overarching interpretive aim: that of revealing the original, true religion that is hidden in exoteric traditions. Many of these tools are not original, and a number are clearly recognizable from the eighteenth century, and well before. Some of these techniques enable a placing on the structure while others enable the insertion of content, and some do both. Space constraints prevent me discussing these in detail. As a very brief example we might note the mechanisms of keys, blinds, allegory, and symbolism. These mechanisms of interpretation are not original and many are clearly recognizable from the eighteenth century and earlier. They suggest the need for interpretation and few reflect actual content themselves. By this I mean that the notion of "blinds" in a text, for example, does not in itself

suggest what is being concealed. That which is concealed is to be revealed by the interpreter. Similarly, the fact that a text is “allegorical” or “symbolical” does not reveal what has been allegorized or symbolized. The full content of the “mysteries” concealed will only be fully revealed in Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine*, where the mature Theosophical vocabulary and system is presented.

We might pause here to reflect on what is happening. H. P. Blavatsky is engaged in interpreting religions and traditions, primarily through an engagement with written texts. Implicit in this is the idea that texts are open to interpretation. Religious texts do not speak, and do not explain themselves. If they did there would be, perhaps, more agreement as to what they are saying. Adopting a Davidsonian distinction between causing and justifying, I propose that texts *cause* beliefs to form around them. These beliefs, the meaning of the text, are a coming together of the text, the interpreter’s existing webs of belief, and the world at large. Texts do not justify these interpretive opinions concerning them. Justification is a function of other beliefs held by those engaged in interpretation. Blavatsky is presenting her conclusions, the results of her insights. The outcome is a universal wisdom tradition that is the same through all traditions in all ages to the extent that it was represented in any particular tradition originally. There are two basic ways to proceed here. Either there is a pre-existing fully formed wisdom tradition which she is locating in historical religions. Or, the result of her research into world traditions has led her to believe there is such a wisdom tradition. In both cases, the universal wisdom tradition is proposed. When I refer to the “wisdom tradition” in these instances, I am referring not only to the idea of a perennial or wisdom tradition, but also to the specific content or propositional statements of that tradition. In terms of the actual content, we might reduce this to a simple option, either H. P. Blavatsky’s tale of Masters and her initiation into the wisdom tradition is true or, her work is the result of her own research and imagination. Either way, we can still identify characteristic interpretive strategies in her comparative religion.

#### 4) ORIGINS OF THE THEOSOPHICAL TEMPLATE

My reading of H. P. Blavatsky’s *oeuvre* proposes that her mature Theosophical system and technical vocabulary is presented in *The Secret Doctrine*. It is in this work that she reveals the dimensions and parameters of the ancient and universal wisdom tradition, the “secret doctrine.” The complete Theosophical system that she presents is the original body of truths,

the primal religion as a body of knowledge about the cosmos, humanity, and history from which all historical religions descend, or are reflections of, in one way or another. This Theosophical system is the result of her comparative religion exercise and her engagement with various nineteenth-century fields of knowledge. She has distilled, located, and we might add, inserted and constructed, the essential core of religions. Below, I sketch in brief the extent to which this final system and vocabulary is anticipated in *Isis Unveiled*. I will be looking for the implicit structures or patterns as well as presentiments of the vocabulary that we see presented in *The Secret Doctrine*. It is, again, not my intent to be comprehensive, but rather indicative. A simple perusal of the index of *Isis Unveiled* reveals a broad array of terms taken up in her later works which I have not mentioned below. We might not, however, expect to find the complete system presented in *Isis Unveiled*. Blavatsky suggests she was not sanctioned to reveal the whole system at the time it was written, and as academics we might expect an author's work to evolve over time.

In terms of the basic patterning, we see numerous “sevening” moves throughout *Isis Unveiled*. Macrocosmically, the basic structure, reflecting the Pythagorean *tetraktis* ( $1+2+3+4 = 10$ ) and the *Kabbalistic* tree of life, is presented in the double-page diagram presented earlier. This basic pattern makes extensive use of trinities, septenaries, and ternaries, all fundamental features of mature Theosophical thought. Linked with this is a doctrine of emanations involving a descent from spirit into matter and a re-ascent to the spiritual state. There is mention of the “days and nights of *brahmā*,” *pralayas*, *sapta-lokas*, and the idea of alternate destruction of the world by fire and water. *Isis Unveiled* references the “Central Spiritual Sun,” primordial substance, the “point in the circle,” and the “androgynous duality” which characterises nature. This duality is reflected in the highest conceptions of deity and the lowest entity conceivable. We find references to the astral light and *Ākāśa*, to cycles, and to globes, the latter of which is a fundamental term associated with the later idea of planetary chains. The microcosm/macrocosm homology is present, but, it is only in *The Secret Doctrine* that the links, sympathies, and influences between the individual, the planetary chain, and the solar system are fully developed.

Historically, a number of elements are in place for later development by Blavatsky. For her, there is a double or triple evolution, reflecting the spiritual, mental, and physical aspects of humanity and nature. The evolution of humanity from an immaterial state into physical matter, with a cyclic re-ascent into spirit, is outlined in *Isis Unveiled*. She presents a history of humanity which includes *pitris* (ancestors), “sons of god,” giants, the “sacred island,” and

Atlantis. Included in this story is reference to “races” of humanity, which divide into the smaller units of family, nation, and tribe. Implicit in the history of humankind are the mystery schools, initiations, and the adepts, all central elements of her narrative.

Anthropologically, it is generally conceded that H. P. Blavatsky presented a three-fold division of the individual – spirit, soul, and body – in *Isis Unveiled*. The later seven-fold division is, however, hinted at in her comments on the constitution of the individual in the Egyptian religion (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. II, 367; Bester 2012, 138). The idea of an originally androgynous humanity which split into male and female is presented, as is the notion that less evolved cosmic spirits failed in attempting to endow early humanity with a spiritual component. It is not my intent to enter the debate over H. P. Blavatsky’s conception, understanding, rejection, or acceptance of reincarnation of metempsychosis (Chajes 2012; Sender 2016). It is sufficient here to note that she introduced the terms, and, like many themes in *Isis Unveiled*, they will be reworked and developed in her later writings. While the mature vocabulary is lacking, she clearly presents various *post-mortem* states which are rooted in a basic dualistic understanding of the individual. Presaging the Third Fundamental Proposition of *The Secret Doctrine*, she outlines an idea of “absorption,” in which the human being possesses a spark of the Central Sun, and that the soul is absorbed into the one spiritual principle at the end of a manifested period. Also present is the idea of recapitulation. Later to become a part of her esoteric instructions, this is the notion that past evolutionary phases are recapitulated in the womb by the embryo. Finally, the term “monad” is introduced, a basic term of later Theosophy.

There are a number of additional terms and concepts that will be developed by Blavatsky. The “secret doctrine” or ancient wisdom tradition, flowing from the East to the West, and rooted in earlier, lost civilizations is important. Blavatsky makes reference to *Sansar* (language of the Sun), which seems a probable precursor of the *Senzar*, the mystery language, in *The Secret Doctrine*. The term *bodhisattva*, while not specifically mentioned, is conceptually outlined. *Karma*, a central term and concept of *The Secret Doctrine*, is associated in *Isis Unveiled* with notions of “revolutions of a wheel,” successions of life and death, moral cause, merit and demerit, a “power that controls the universe,” and successive self-procreations in future embodiments.

It is not within the scope of this thesis to examine earlier works which reflected similar concepts as above and which may have been specific resources or precursors for Blavatsky’s

speculations. An example of such a source is Isaac Preston Cory's *Ancient Fragments* (1832), a source acknowledged by Blavatsky, which proposes the following characteristics as components of Heathen or Ancient Theology – a microcosm/macrocosm sympathy, human nature the same in all ages resulting in identical truths, a hermaphroditic deity – the One, male and female conceptions of the gods, three hypostases (trinity speculations), the monad, and a concept of the succession of worlds which are alternately destroyed by flood and fire (1832, xxxiii-lix, 333-58). Other works which have been proposed as precursors to her writings include Godfrey Higgin's *Anacalypsis* (1836) and Emma Hardinge Britten's *Art Magic* (1876).

In *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky is already working with many of the terms and concepts of her mature Theosophy. It is surprising the extent to which the seeds of her later vocabulary and conceptions are already present in this, her first major work. Her later writings appear, in many instances, to be essentially elaborations on and developments of positions already hinted at. The chief implication of this is that the origins of her Theosophical thought needs to be pushed back to *Isis Unveiled* and before. *The Secret Doctrine* is the culmination of a process, not the beginning. Certainly, in *Isis Unveiled*, her basic orientation to the various knowledge fields of the late nineteenth century is already in place.

## 5) CONCLUSION

James Gleick offered a description of the “butterfly effect” of chaos theory as the “sensitive dependence on initial conditions” (1993, 8). My appreciation of H. P. Blavatsky's engagement with religion requires an understanding of both my own entry point and selections and Blavatsky's use of the resources available to her in the nineteenth century. The consequence of this is a suspension of hierarchical assessments of the various knowledge fields of the late nineteenth century, which will result in, among other things, a questioning of teleological and normative narratives of the history of comparative religion.

In the next chapter, I undertake two tasks. Firstly, I pursue the development of the technical Theosophical vocabulary, system, and by implication, its methodology, by tracing key texts in the interim years between *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*. While the works to be examined are not attributed to Blavatsky they are so intimately connected to her that they cannot be separated from her. Secondly, I examine the culmination of her work as an

enterprise in comparative religion as it is presented in *The Secret Doctrine*. My focus shifts from justifying and sourcing Blavatsky's ideas towards an examination of her Theosophical system as an interpretive tool. Like any interpretive theory, her system unlocks the hidden meaning behind religion and religions. The search for an original prototype of religion will result in a classificatory exercise in which historical religions are measured and assessed against the original. As H. P. Blavatsky's system takes shape, it becomes self-supporting and takes on a life of its own. It no longer needs to justify itself and it becomes, instead, a self-sufficient system. This Theosophical classificatory exercise, therefore, is to be evaluated for its use and explanatory power within the historical context from which it emerged.

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### 1) INTRODUCTION

I am arguing that H. P. Blavatsky established an interpretive position with respect to religion as a category and in relation to the various religions of the world. The two main components of her comparative stance are the identifying of an underlying template, an *ur-form*, and the development of a technical vocabulary to express her ideas. I have worked to show that the seeds of these strategies were sown in *Isis Unveiled*. In the first section of this chapter I trace both the germination of this pattern or grid and the development of this language between the years 1877 and 1888. As it is my position that her system was definitively stated in its mature form in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) I will engage with this major work of hers in the second section of this chapter. I track the trajectory of her ideas chronologically, dealing with each year separately or, where practical, by grouping years together. The primary sources I will be drawing on are Blavatsky's *Collected Writings* for the years 1877 to 1887/8, A. O. Hume's "Fragments of Occult Truth" (1881), A. P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883), and the *Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett* (1880-1886). While the latter three works are not attributed to Blavatsky they are the works in which, during this interim period, the Theosophical system unfolded.

Specifically, I am looking for the holistic integration of the Theosophical cosmological speculations with the seven-fold human constitution and the evolution of the human being through history, including through the various kingdoms of nature. Once this scheme is presented in the recognizably mature Theosophical vocabulary, I will regard the template as being in place and move to a discussion of *The Secret Doctrine*. We shall see that Blavatsky's holistic system is essentially established by 1882/3, being first sufficiently presented for my purposes in the *Mahatma Letters*. My review of the interim years will, therefore, terminate in 1883, at which point I pick up the thread in 1888 with *The Secret Doctrine*. It must be noted that I am privileging the development of the *seven-fold constitution of the individual* due to its centrality in Theosophical thought. It is also not compulsory that the final terminology of cosmogenesis and the evolution of the human race be fully presented. Partial, specific statements are evidence of the complete system. For example, if humanity can be said to be in the "fifth" race I will assume the races doctrine is in place even if no specific mention of the other six races are made. My comments below will become increasingly focused and limited



to the scope of this thesis as the decade of the 1880s unfolds. What follows in the years from 1883 to *The Secret Doctrine*, and after, is a series of refinements, amplifications, debates, alternate variants, and contestations over specifics and it becomes impossible and unnecessary, for my purposes, to track these in any detail.

The two primary interpretive tools, the Theosophical vocabulary and the unfolding of the basic typology, are inherently bound to each other. For example, Theosophy proposes a seven-fold division of the human constitution which devolves from a spiritual component to a physical body. This is the basic pattern, or type, of the human being and of all entities, including planets, solar systems, and so on. The classic Theosophical terms for these seven human principles are: *atman*, *buddhi*, *manas*, *kama*, *prana*, *linga-sarira*, and *sthula-sarira*,<sup>49</sup> and each term has a place in the structure. I am aware that there are various versions, interpretive refinements in my estimation, of this seven-fold division within Blavatsky's writings and, therefore, varying vocabularies. However, the basic pattern of seven must remain or the Theosophical edifice risks disintegration. As these terms are recognizably Asian, how then does one identify a vocabulary as Theosophical? The answer is two-fold. Firstly, the denotation of a set term must reflect the basic attributes that Theosophy attaches to that concept and, secondly, the specific term must be understood within a holistic structure and be surrounded by other identifiable Theosophical terms. For example, should *atman* be discussed outside of the broader context of the Theosophical seven-fold constitution of the individual, we may assume that it is not necessarily, or obviously, being used in the sense of the primary Theosophical vocabulary. It is difficult to specify set conditions on this issue and each instance of use should be individually assessed.

## 2) THE INTERIM YEARS

It is not my intention to trace in any detail continuity in various themes that underwrite H. P. Blavatsky's comparative religion, but it is worth recording that a number of them are carried through. Importantly, she retains her stance on the séance phenomena. These phenomena are real and authentic and many of her positions flow from this understanding. The ambiguous and ambivalent relation of science and scientists to these phenomena allow her to accept some of the scientific endeavours of her day while at the same time rejecting those limiting

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<sup>49</sup> I copy *Sanskrit* terms directly as I find them in the source literature and make no attempt to harmonise, correct, or update them.

and materialistic versions which she abhors. The rhetorical linking of séance phenomena and occult sciences to ancient magic still allows her to read religious scriptures, when properly interpreted, as true descriptions of the world which enables her search for the pure, archaic, and original system. Blavatsky displays a confidence in the emerging field of psychology– a field she believes will eventually lead to a conception of the individual person as multi-dimensional instead of as just a material entity. That the “soul” or “mind” exists independent of the body leads into her argument that the more subtle dimensions of the mind can know reality as it really is and present the “Truth” of the world and the human being. The East is still the origin of the wisdom religion and holds the keys to unlock later historical traditions. Theosophical statements are the result of honest and reflective research which involves “studying,” “seeking,” and “comparing” various systems and philosophies (Blavatsky n.d., 66, 108). Theosophy is an “analytical science,” an intuitive “spiritual knowledge,” and the result of free and fearless investigation (Blavatsky nd., 23, 32, 44). Furthermore, she writes, “The religion of the Society is an algebraical equation, in which so long as the sign = of equality is not omitted, each member is allowed to substitute quantities of his own, which better accord with climatic and other exigencies of his native land, with the idiosyncrasies of his people, or even with his own” (Blavatsky n.d., 101). The Theosophical Society can have no dogmas, but still claim the Truth in the conception of H. P. Blavatsky.

## 2.1) Interim Years - 1877 - 1880

H. P. Blavatsky does not present the seven-fold human principles in the years 1877-1880 though she had numerous occasions to do so. We have noted the ambiguity in *Isis Unveiled*, where the three-fold division is generally proposed but that this division is complicated by her discussion of the Egyptian principles. In 1878 she can still reference the three parts of the individual, though this is complicated by her statement that the “soul” can be divided into “several parts, and have names for each of these and their functions” (Blavatsky 1977, 292, 365.) In 1879 she refers to “man” as a Tetraktys or “quaternary” (Blavatsky n.d., 15). In two 1880 articles on the symbolism of the number seven she signally fails to mention the seven-fold human principles (Blavatsky n.d., 409, 448). This omission is striking when one reviews all the “sevens” which are listed.

In terms of the vocabulary the situation is similar. Many technical terms are mentioned though their use is outside of a tightly interwoven, holistic Theosophical structure.

Interestingly, Blavatsky is aware that a technical terminology needs to be developed and mentions the need for the “invention of special words” (Blavatsky 1977, 336). Examples of specific terms referencing the individual that do appear include *jīvâtman*, *paramâtman*, *atman*, *mahatmas*, *Kama-Rupa*, *Mayâvi-Rupa*, *avatars*, *moksha*, and astral forms. There are also examples of what might be called a failed vocabulary. There is mention of *Íśvara-Bhava* and *Jiva-Bhava* (Blavatsky 1977, 335). While *Íśvara* and *jiva* became elements of the standard Theosophical vocabulary, the terms as presented here did not.

In terms of cosmology, there are intimations of the seven-fold division of the universe and the solar system, though there is no tightly integrated system of the mature Theosophy of later works. Blavatsky’s Theosophical structure is absent at this point in my reading of these works, though the seeds are sown and are germinating. Terms reflecting historical and cosmological concepts include *mâyâ*, *pralaya*, *bhût*, *svabhavat*, *manu*, *akasa*, globes, *dhyâni*, and universal soul. These scattered references are not embedded in the holistic system, which will give them the semantic value that I am looking for. Nor do I find the dramatic *corrective* workings of the template. In this I would expect to find wholesale re-descriptions of religious statements and texts after having been assessed against the complete grid.

## 2.2) Interim Years – 1881

As scholars have pointed out it is neither in *Isis Unveiled* nor *The Secret Doctrine* that the Theosophical scheme is first presented (Hall 2007, 5; Santucci 2008, 41, 52-4; Trompf 2011, 57; Crow 2012, 710). The first statement of the seven-fold constitution of the human being is to be found in A. O. Hume’s “Fragment of Occult Truth” (1881), and versions of the mature Theosophical scheme are found in Sinnett’s *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) and in the *Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett* (1880-1886), texts I will reference below.

In a sense we are building up to October 1881, which is the date Hume’s “Fragments of Occult Truth” was published in *The Theosophist* journal. Prior to October 1881 we do not see definitive evidence for the developed Theosophical template and vocabulary. H. P. Blavatsky’s scheme would be a tight analogous relation between the human principles, cosmic infrastructure, and the root-races, rounds, and globes (the principles of a planet). Clues for the existence of this scheme would be a tendency to correct, amplify, and reread religious terms and doctrines against this template and language. To simply refer to a

macrocosm/microcosm link in general would not be sufficiently unique an idea to call it specifically Blavatskyian or Theosophical. I am seeking the particularities of the Theosophical typology and terminology.

Despite this, prior to the publishing of Hume's article, I do find a movement, a circling towards a point. H. P. Blavatsky references a number of what will become specific Theosophical terms, including *atma*, *Parabrahman* (*Parabrahm*), *nirvana*, *Paramâtmâ*, *Purusha*, *jîvâtma*, *pralaya*, *Maha-Pralaya*, Planetary Spirits, planetary system, "Day of Brahmâ," and *Devas*. Glaring omissions remain; for example, there is a footnote with philological speculations on the Sanskrit root *budh* but, curiously, no mention of the central Theosophical term *buddhi*. Some of the terms under examination are contained in quotes from third party works, and we must assume that by extracting the passages Blavatsky was familiar with them. Examples of this include the following phrases, "spiritual or monadial plane of existence" and the "material or sensuous plane" (Blavatsky 1968, 21). Blavatsky quotes these in a passage drawn from Jacob Dixen's *Hygienic Clairvoyance* (1859, 20-1). The importance to the later Theosophical language that the term "monad" and the idea of "planes of existence" assume is suggestive.

Two instances relating to the evolving vocabulary might be specifically noted. The first is in an article published in September 1881. Blavatsky makes reference to the "Astral Soul," *Kama-rupa*, and *Kama* (desire) (1968, 282-3). This can be seen as a development, refinement, and amplification of the body, soul, and spirit division of the individual. She is consolidating and developing her multi-dimensional understanding of the individual. The second point of importance is more of an omission than a positive step forward. Blavatsky had ample opportunity to present the developed technical Theosophical terms, and she discusses in various places the after-death states of the individual. Yet, there is no mention of classic Theosophical terms such as, *devachan*<sup>50</sup> or *kama-loka* (1968, 189, 210). In another place she discusses various ideas in Tibetan Buddhism, but she retains the number five in relation to certain concepts. In later works, this would be fleshed out to an "esoteric seven." The corrective element, indicative of a weighing and measuring, is still unfocused at this point.

Chronologically, we turn to A. O. Hume's "Fragment of Occult Truth" (No. 1) which Julie Hall references as the first Theosophical statement of the complete seven-fold constitution of

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<sup>50</sup> A mention of *Deva-Chan* in brackets in an article is a later commentary by one of the *mahatmas* (1968, 287).

the individual (2007, 5). The codifying of the number seven in relation to the individual, coupled with a microcosm/macrocosm homology, would signal an important development in the Theosophical scheme. Copying the vocabulary of Hume's seven-fold "subdivisions of the Occultists" we can note: (1) the Physical Body; (2) the Vital principle (*Jiv-atma*); (3) the Astral body (*Linga Sharira*); (4) the Astral shape (*kama rupa*); (5) "the animal or physical intelligence or consciousness or Ego, analogous to, though proportionally higher in degree than, the reason, instinct, memory, imagination, &c., existing in the higher animals;" (6) "the Higher or Spiritual intelligence or consciousness, or spiritual Ego, in which mainly resides the sense of consciousness in the *perfect* man, though the lower dimmer animal consciousness co-exists in No. 5;" and (7) "The Spirit – an emanation from the ABSOLUTE; uncreated; eternal; a state rather than a being" (Hume 1881, 18-19). We immediately note one thing: though this is certainly the seven-fold Theosophical scheme, it is not the completed vocabulary. Omitted in Hume's article are the Sanskrit names for the fifth (*manas*), sixth (*buddhi*), and seventh (*atman*) principles. I believe this is important as I am looking for the coming together of the underlying typology and the associated vocabulary.

Following Hume's October article we anticipate H. P. Blavatsky developing the seven-fold scheme, in particular referencing the constitution of the individual, and terminology. In October 1881 she mentions "*Atma*" as the "highest Spiritual Soul" (Blavatsky 1968, 304). Why, we might ask, did Hume not present this term? In November, discussing among other topics Haug's translation of the *Aitareya Brâhmanam*, she mentions "*manas* (mind)." In the same article, in the context of a microcosm/macrocosm link, she writes,

These three spirits are described as double: (1) the spirit of the Elements (terrestrial body and vital principle); (2) the spirit of the stars (sidereal or *astral* body and *will* governing it); (3) the spirit of the spiritual world (the animal and the spiritual souls) – the *seventh* principle being an almost *immaterial* spirit or the divine Augoeides, *Atma*, represented by the central point, which corresponds to the human navel. This *seventh* principle is the *Personal* God of every man, say the old Western and Eastern Occultists. (1968, 319-21)

She continues by presenting a correspondence between five cosmic elements, five organs of action of the individual, five limbs of the individual, and five senses of the individual. These "five elements" enter into the "composition of man" and, importantly, are quickly completed into the "*seven* principles" (Blavatsky 1968, 322). We see here the beginnings of the specific homological conceptualisations of Blavatsky's Theosophy. Missing are links to the root-races

and rounds. Once the cosmic and human principles are linked to the historical periods, with the specific technical vocabulary, the Theosophical scheme is in place. In the balance of her articles of 1881 there are references to the seven principles, *Atman*, *Kama-rupa*, *Kama*, and *Mayavi-rupa* (“Illusionary Body”).

What had the *mahatmas* revealed to A. P. Sinnett on the issues under discussion in 1881? They endorse a number of the themes we are discussing, including the notions of an objective primordial truth “impressed on plastic minds” of the earliest humans, cycles, *karma*, “chains of worlds,” *Bodhisatwas*, *Kiu-te*, *Dhyan-Chohans*, *manvantaras*, and *pralayas*. There are, however, some letters of specific interest in relation to the seven principles. In Letter no. 9, received by Sinnett on July 8, 1881, there is reference to an individual’s “*astral soul*,” “*higher Self...divine atman*,” “*linga sarira* or astral Soul,” and “*Kama rupa/doppelganger*” (1972, 43). Later in the same letter they refer to Anna Kingsford’s inability to discriminate between “the animal and spiritual Egos, the *Jiv-atma* (or *Linga-Sharir*) and the *Kama-Rupa* (or *Atma-Rupa*)” (1972, 46). We come then to a small mystery. In *Mahatma Letter* no. 26 we read, “Please then, remember, what she tried to explain, and what you gathered tolerably well from her, namely the fact of the *seven* principles in the *complete* human being” (1972, 201). This letter is dated to “Autumn” in the *Letters*, and to “September (estimate)” in Linton and Hanson’s *Readers Guide* (1988, 8). This is interesting as if the September dating is correct it is possibly the first explicit Theosophical reference to the seven-fold constitution of the individual.

Any references to the seven principles after October 1881 would be of lesser interest, as the principle had now been established. 1881 was then an important year in the development of the Theosophical grid and vocabulary. The introduction of the seven-fold constitution of the individual, the main terms of the technical language, and the elementary, idiosyncratic linking of the microcosm and macrocosm heralds the mature Theosophy of *The Secret Doctrine*. All the elements are in place for H. P. Blavatsky’s interpretive scheme and vocabulary, and we search for the harmonising of these elements into an interpretive strategy, the foundation of a comparative religion.

### 2.3) Interim Years – 1882

1882 is a pivotal year in the unfolding of Theosophical thought. It is in the *Mahatma Letters* that H. P. Blavatsky's holistic Theosophical template is significantly presented, and by the end of the year the seven-fold human constitution and vocabulary is in place. Once these are formalised the interpretive movements of Theosophy are enabled.

In January 1882 T. Subba Row, an important early member of the Theosophical Society, published an article, “The Arhan-Arhat Esoteric Tenets on the Sevenfold Principle in Man” in *The Theosophist* journal. In this article he presents the following table,

I.	<i>Prakriti.</i>	<i>Sthûlaśarîra</i> (Physical Body).
II.	The entity evolved out of the combination of <i>Prakriti</i> and <i>Śakti</i> .	<i>Sûkshmaśarîra</i> or <i>Linga-śarîra</i> (Astral Body).
III.	<i>Śakti.</i>	<i>Kâmarûpa</i> (the <i>Périsprit</i> ).
IV.	The entity evolved out of the combination of <i>Brahman</i> , <i>Śakti</i> and <i>Prakriti</i> .	<i>Jîvâtma</i> (Life-Soul).
V.	Do. <i>Brahman</i> and <i>Prakriti</i> .	Physical Intelligence (or animal soul).
VI.	Do. <i>Brahman</i> and <i>Śakti</i> .	Spiritual Intelligence (or Soul).
VII.	<i>Brahman.</i>	The emanation from the ABSOLUTE, etc. (or pure spirit).

(Blavatsky 1968, 407-14).

This table displays a clear and specific conceptual link between cosmic and human principles. While not displayed in the table, the terms *Buddhi* and *Atma* are presented by Subba Row in relation to the seven principles further in the article. Still lacking in the seven-fold classification of human principles is the specific term *manas*, though “Mind” is specifically linked with the fifth principle. Subba Row's article also references the Theosophical cosmic pattern when he speaks of the “MONAD,” from which evolve “*three primary entities*,” from which in turn “*seven entities*” are said to emanate (1968, 406). In an article on Zoroastrianism, Blavatsky appears to make reference to the “*racés of man*” and to six and seven periods of world evolution (1968, 462, 465). In April 1882, in an article ironically

discussing the need for a “metaphysico-spiritual vocabulary,” she makes the noteworthy point that each of the “*seven principles of living mortal man*” are “subdivided in its turn into seven more” (Blavatsky 1969, 52). I believe this seven-fold subdivision of the seven basic principles is an important development, as it is a foundational idea of mature Theosophy. In May 1882 she is still referring to the “6<sup>th</sup>” and “7<sup>th</sup>” principle, but is not yet specifically calling them *buddhi* and *atman* (Blavatsky 1969, 101). In August 1882, while emphasising the idea of the seven aspects of the human constitution, she references the six chakras, mentioning *Mûlâdhâra* by name, all of which are “fed” by the “*seventh*” (Blavatsky 1969, 165).

In August 1882 we find what I have been anticipating – a clear statement of the seven-fold constitution of the individual in the almost settled Theosophical terminology. The following table is presented,

GROUP 1.	SPIRIT.
7. <i>Atma</i> – “Pure Spirit.”	<i>Spiritual Monad</i> or “Individuality”- and its
6. <i>Buddhi</i> – “Spiritual Soul or Intelligence.”	<i>vehicle</i> . Eternal and indestructible.
GROUP II.	SOUL.
5. <i>Manas</i> – “Mind or Animal Soul.”	<i>Astral Monad</i> – or the <i>personal Ego</i> and its
4. <i>Kama-rupa</i> – “Desire” or “Passion” Form.	<i>vehicle</i> . Survives Group III. and is destroyed after a time, unless <i>reincarnated</i> , as said, under exceptional circumstances.
GROUP III.	BODY.
3. <i>Linga-śarira</i> – “Astral or Vital body.”	Compound Physical, or the “ <i>Earthly Ego</i> .”
2. <i>Jiva</i> – “Life Principle.”	The three die together <i>invariably</i> .
1. <i>Sthula-śarira</i> – “Body.”	

(Blavatsky 1969, 185).

I say “almost settled” terminology because later Theosophy will largely replace the term *jiva* with *prana*. The principle and detail remain, however, the same. By October 1882 H. P. Blavatsky is using this template to interpret other scriptures – her primary comparative technique. Engaging with James Legge’s translation of the *Yi King* or *Book of Changes*, she makes the following interpretive equivalences: *Kwei* (physical body), *Shin* (vital principle), *Kwei-Shin* (*linga-śarira*, or vital soul), *Zing* (the fourth principle or *Kama-Rupa*), *Pho*



(animal soul), *Khien* (spiritual soul), and *Hwân* (pure spirit) (1969, 243). Completing her references in 1882, she makes note of the “races of men” of which, significantly, “we are the *fifth*,” and their relation to Atlantis and submerged continents and cycles (Blavatsky 1969, 262-3). As I proposed earlier, to mention the “fifth” is to presuppose the others.

In relation to cosmological terms, we find the first mention of “*Deva chan*” in 1882, as well as additional references to the *Kama-Loka* (1969, 121, 256, 189, 261). These become standard terms for the after-death localities and states. 1882 also sees the referencing of “*Fohat*,” the “ONE LIFE,” “Space,” “Motion,” and “Duration” (1968, 405, 422-3; 1969, 220). These are foundational terms and concepts of *The Secret Doctrine*. Blavatsky, warming to her “sevening,” notes “there is nothing impossible that in time there will be discovered a fifth, sixth, and even *seventh* condition of matter, as well as seven senses in man, and that all nature will finally be found septenary” (1969 224). It is, perhaps, no surprise that this statement is made in reference to Zöllner’s and Crookes’ scientific researches into spiritualism and its attendant phenomena.

The pivotal significance of the year 1882 is further highlighted in the *Mahatma Letters*. We can turn straight to Letter 13, dated to January 28, 1882 by Linton and Hanson (1988, 11).<sup>51</sup> The importance of this letter is not so much the developed vocabulary, which is in part there, but the fact that many of the statements made presuppose the existence of the Theosophical template. Individual statements, I argue, can only be properly understood in terms of the holistic Theosophical presentation. In relation to the seven-fold human constitution this letter is not yet displaying the complete mature Blavatskyian terminology, instead referring to “body,” “*jivatma*,” “*linga shariram*,” “*Kamarupa*,” “animal soul,” “sixth principle,” and the “seventh” (principle) (Barker 1972, 71-3). These individual principles are all linked to parent cosmic principles. What is of importance is that the complex seven-fold homology between cosmological (creation) processes, the physiological process of human birth, and the birth of a world or planet is developed. This intricate linking is fundamental to H. P. Blavatsky’s speculations in *The Secret Doctrine* as well as in her Inner Group and Esoteric Section teachings. Of particular interest is the development of the vocabulary around the evolution of the human being on the planet. We are introduced to the evolutionary terms of “rounds,” “races,” and “globes,” the idea of the ascending and descending arc of involution and evolution, and the cycling of souls through the various kingdoms of nature. If “present

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<sup>51</sup> Additional details are outlined in Section II of the *Mahatma Letters*, “Philosophical and Theoretical Teachings 1881-1883”, however, the type is sufficiently outlined in this letter for my argument.

mankind is in its *fourth* round,” we can suspect that the rounds doctrine must be substantially in place. To know the fourth round, and link it to the fourth (*kama*) principle of the individual, is indicative of a developed, closely interlinked, self-referring, and self-justifying system.

In brief summary of 1882, we realise that the seven-fold constitution of the individual and its specific terminology is in place. The seven-fold microcosm/macrocosm sympathy is detailed, and the complicated evolution of the human entity through the rounds and races on earth, linked to both seven-fold cosmic processes and the human constitution, is presented. What I expect to find from this point on is refinements of the system and contestations over terminology, much as one finds with the development of any theory.

#### 2.4) Interim Years – 1883

As noted above, scholars have identified A. P. Sinnett’s *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) as the first presentation of a mature Theosophy. I turn, therefore, to this book in search of the development of the Theosophical scheme and language as utilised by H. P. Blavatsky.

We might quickly note what *Esoteric Buddhism* does not contain. The work does not contain significant developments in cosmological speculations. Lacking still are many key terms and ideas which assume prominence in *The Secret Doctrine*, for example, *mulaprakriti*, the One Life, Space, Motion, Duration, *svabhavat*, and the concept of the three cosmic Logoi. What *Esoteric Buddhism* does contain are important theoretical statements on the constitution and evolution of the individual and humanity.

The chapter headings reveal the scope of *Esoteric Buddhism*: “Esoteric Teachers,” “The Constitution of Man,” “The Planetary Chain,” “The World Periods,” “Devachan,” “Kama Loka,” “The Human Tide-Wave,” “The Progress of Humanity,” “Buddha,” “Nirvana,” “The Universe,” and “The Doctrine Renewed.” The mature seven-fold constitution, with its most recognizable vocabulary, is detailed: The Body (*Rupa*), Vitality (*Prana*, or *Jiva*), Astral Body (*Linga Sharira*), Animal Soul (*Kama Rupa*), Human Soul (*Manas*), Spiritual Soul (*Buddhi*), and Spirit (*Atma*) (1987, 24). Of particular relevance to my broader argument is Sinnett’s outline of the evolution of the individual through the various *kingdoms of nature*, the *races*, the *rounds*, and the *globes* of a *Planetary Chain*, which itself is part of a *Solar System*. The unequivocal reference to the after-death states of *Devachan* and *Kama Loka*, and the way in

which these two concepts relate to the individual human principles, are intrinsic aspects of Blavatsky's presentation of Theosophy. These teachings are all drawn into a tight, interconnected, and holistic body of statements which larger structure provides the semantic value of the individual component terms.

## 2.5) Anomalous References

For completeness sake I reviewed two separately published volumes of letters written by H. P. Blavatsky, *The Letters of H. P. Blavatsky to A. P. Sinnett* (1973) and *The Letters of H. P. Blavatsky* (2003), as well as her writings pre-dating *Isis Unveiled*. I am seeking early references to the Theosophical structure and terminology as they will be presented in her later writings. I had not anticipated finding much information on these themes in writings prior to *Isis Unveiled*, as the scheme and vocabulary were in development in this latter work. The scheme and content could not, presumably, predate its own development. However, two references caught my attention. The first is Letter 44, dated May 21, 1875 and addressed to H. S. Olcott, in *The Letters of H. P. Blavatsky*, which presents a number of intriguing concepts, some reminiscent of the ideas of Andrew Jackson Davis, that appear to presage in germ some of the later thoughts of H. P. Blavatsky. Speaking of "what *is* a man on Earth" it refers to seven "past, present and subsequent existences in different spheres;" of the "final formation of the *real, complete man*, who can become only on the Seventh Sphere a perfect *microcosmos*;" of man perfecting himself upon reaching the Seventh Sphere, and "Every man or person living on this Earth lives in the *fourth* sphere properly speaking. We reckon 7 spheres from the 1<sup>st</sup> sphere we go to from here, but it's an incorrect word. For every sphere has seven subdivisions or sections or regions; and when we say the "spirit passed to the second or third Sphere"" we ought properly to say that he passed to the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> *region* of the 5<sup>th</sup> sphere (our Earth is the last region of the 4<sup>th</sup>)" (Blavatsky 2003, 164-168). The detailed specifics seem almost too precise to be chance. The second reference is found in H. P. Blavatsky's *Collected Writings* volume I. In 1875, discussing both the Hebrew and Oriental "Cabala," she makes reference to "our planet" which comes fourth in a series of seven spheres. The two or three pages discussing this "Oriental Cabala," clearly linked to the Jewish Kabbalah, are reminiscent of the final scheme she will present (1977, 110-2).

I terminate here my examination of the interim years 1877/8-1887 and, following a brief summary, will move to a discussion of *The Secret Doctrine*, published in 1888.

### 3) SUMMARY

A number of points might be made as we move towards *The Secret Doctrine* of H. P. Blavatsky: Firstly, I have attempted to trace the origin and development of the Theosophical system from *Isis Unveiled*. The earliest detailed presentation of the Theosophical system is found in *Esoteric Buddhism*. *Esoteric Buddhism*, however, masks its origin. It is quite possible to read and understand *Esoteric Buddhism* without any reference to earlier Theosophical literature. In this work the Theosophical scheme exists as an “entity” and does not explicitly betray its developmental history.

Secondly, related to the above, *Esoteric Buddhism* is not concerned with justifying its statements. Gone are the detailed arguments of *Isis Unveiled* and the heavy referencing of a wide number of works in support of an argument. *Esoteric Buddhism* is a straightforward expression of a body of thought, of a system, which is not purposely linked to other knowledge fields. Theosophy is now self-justifying, self-referencing, internally coherent, and self-sustaining. It is, in short, a theory of the world, humanity and, important for my purposes, of religion.

Thirdly, flowing from the points above, the structure and vocabulary of Theosophy is in place. The implication of this is that it can now be applied as an interpretive tool and method. Theosophical statements are not simply a body of teachings, they are a yardstick against which religions will be measured and assessed. The Theosophical method will be *applied* by H. P. Blavatsky in *The Secret Doctrine* as an interpretive tool which can recover lost meaning in the religions of the world, and from various other fields of inquiry.

For my purposes, there is little to be gained by further tracking these developments or refinements through the Blavatsky’s writings, or elsewhere, during the years of 1884-1887/8. Instead, I move directly to her magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine*. This work is H. P. Blavatsky’s grand attempt to appropriate authority and to interpret religion through the application of her Theosophical theory and methodology.

### 4) *THE SECRET DOCTRINE* (1888)

*The Secret Doctrine* is the recognized *magnum opus* of H. P. Blavatsky. It is her most ambitious and characteristic work. It is not, however, unique in her *oeuvre*, as it shows much

continuity on many different levels with *Isis Unveiled*. I focus in the remainder of this chapter on this work as an enterprise in comparative religion.

#### 4.1) BACKGROUND

In chapter two I outlined in some detail the background, nature of production, academic perspectives, and accusations of plagiarism as they related to *Isis Unveiled*. Many of the same issues and criticisms, raised often by the same actors, were made in respect of *The Secret Doctrine*. Certainly, a number of people were involved in the editing, collating, and organising of the work, including W. Q. Judge, T. Subba Row, H. S. Olcott, the Countess Wachtmeister, Archibald and Bertram Keightley, and G. R. S. Mead. The work also attracted the accusation of plagiarism from W. E. Coleman, and academic scholars of both the past and present are divided over its nature and quality. The clairvoyant and *mahatmic* claims of inspiration either add to the texts aura of authority or serve to disqualify it from positive, rational assessment. The stated aims of *The Secret Doctrine* are in continuity with *Isis Unveiled* and show that Blavatsky was concerned with opposing materialism and emphasising the “occult side” of nature. Linked to this she wished to correct materialistic speculations on the nature of humanity. Finally, and relevant to my thesis, she will work to rescue the “archaic truths which are the basis of all religions” and to uncover “the fundamental unity from which they all spring” (1988b, vol. I, viii). With this in mind, there is little to be gained by going into the same level of background and production detail here; instead I emphasis three points which relate to my broader narrative.<sup>52</sup>

The first point concerns the dating of *The Secret Doctrine*. While notice of a general successor to *Isis Unveiled* was signalled as early as 1879, it is in 1884 that the first published notice for *The Secret Doctrine* is found (Zirkoff 1977, 2; Santucci 2016, 118-9). This links to my narrative as I locate the revealing of the mature Theosophical template and vocabulary in 1883. From 1884 onwards Blavatsky is harnessing, elaborating, and refining her position–activity which will eventually result in the publication of *The Secret Doctrine*.

The second point concerns the status of the *Stanzas of Dzyan* and the *Esoteric Commentaries*. For some academic scholars these works are sources of humour, de-legitimation, and

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<sup>52</sup> A useful work discussing the historical production of *The Secret Doctrine* is Boris de Zirkoff’s *Rebirth of the Occult Tradition* (1977).

charlatanry; for Theosophists they are a source of authority and inspiration; for a sympathetic scholar like David Reigle they are historical works which may potentially be located; for the purposes of my thesis, however, I find them largely irrelevant (Campbell 1980, 31-51; Hanegraaff 1998, 453; Reigle 1999; Goodrick-Clarke 2004, 14, 131; Hammer 2004; Lavoie 2012, 213; Lubelsky 2012, 118, 126-31; Reigle 2013). It is important to note that Blavatsky does all the conceptual work in her commentaries on the *Stanzas* and in the essays which form the second and third divisions of each volume of *The Secret Doctrine*. Were these explanatory sections not available there would be no way for anyone to reconstruct them from the *Stanzas* and *Esoteric Commentaries* alone. I argue, then, that the primary intellectual value is contained outside of the *Stanzas* and the importance of *The Secret Doctrine* lies in the explanatory sections where the details and parameters of the ancient wisdom tradition, the Theosophical template, are presented.

The third point is the intended audience of *The Secret Doctrine*. To describe the book as esoteric, classify it as occult, or to study it exclusively within the academic field of Western esotericism serves, in part, to mask the fact that the work was intended for broader public consumption. It also obscures the fact that, for Blavatsky, revealed esoteric truths could no longer be regarded as “esoteric,” which alludes to the definitional debates surrounding the term (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, xvii; Blavatsky 1980, 350). She noted, “*The Secret Doctrine* is not an occult book, as I told you, but a printed work for the public” (2010, ix, 425). There were restricted teachings in the Theosophical Society but *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* are not among them.

It might, however, be conceded that there should be no normative way of engaging with a text. In practical terms a text can be read for any stated reason proposed. As an example, within the Theosophical Society one can find the notion that *The Secret Doctrine* is deliberately ambiguous and incomplete in its statements and, therefore, defies categorisation. This ensures that the process of reading is itself a meditative technique which is said to stimulate the intuition. It is also suggested that this is a safeguard against dogmatic presentations of Theosophy though, it might be noted, that this stance also ensures the book remains closed to critical and academic scrutiny. Proponents of this understanding of the text could draw on Blavatsky for supporting statements (Bowen 1979, 7-9; Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 516).

#### 4.2) A RECAPITULATION:

Before moving to a discussion of the comparative method of *The Secret Doctrine* it may be useful to close the circle on some of the orienting assumptions outlined in the previous chapter. The foremost, perhaps, is H. P. Blavatsky's relationship to spiritualism as detailed in the work. We note that spiritualism is called on to do the same rhetorical work as in earlier works, though its explicit place in *The Secret Doctrine* is more marginal and references are few. While distancing herself from "crimped" spiritualist explanations and scientific perspectives she still embraces the "facts" of the séance room and presents the various scientific endeavours positively engaging with them as support for her theories. For example, she suggests that séance materialisations are similar to early modes of procreation in the human race (1988b, vol. II, 86). Blavatsky is concerned with presenting nature as being imbued with intelligences of various orders and powers. Occultists, according to her, are the "rational expounders" of ancient religions and she engages in a broad interpretation of religion in terms of hierarchies of intelligences, which are real and active in nature (1988b, vol. I, 287). Though the Society for Psychical Research was established in 1882 one might speculate that the late 1880s did not produce the definitive proof of phenomena many anticipated, though the efforts were far from being over.<sup>53</sup> Blavatsky's receding from the spiritualist discourse may reflect in part this disappointment, and also the fact that she had by this point developed her own vocabulary. Her Theosophical efforts then focused on a broad and sustained interpretive methodology of religion.

The rhetorical linking of Theosophy to the broader scientific enterprise is apparent from the earliest writings. H. S. Olcott notes, "This Society was neither a religious nor a charitable but a scientific body" (1974, 156). William Q. Judge writes, "Embracing both the scientific and the religious, Theosophy is a scientific religion and a religious science" (1973, 1). H. P. Blavatsky made similar claims for Theosophy in *Isis Unveiled*, and *The Secret Doctrine* is in continuity with those earlier statements. The claim of being "scientific" was one of the currencies of authority in the late nineteenth century, and Theosophists, like spiritualists, and we might add students of religion, could see the value of adopting such a stance. Detailed studies of H. P. Blavatsky's engagement with all the scientific fields of her day are still to be done, and here I make only some orienting comments.

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<sup>53</sup> The positive scientific impulse associated with spiritualism had certainly not been overcome by the end of the 1880s. For example, A. R. Wallace's *Darwinism* with its well-known 15<sup>th</sup> chapter, wherein he excluded man from the general laws of evolution and natural selection, was published in 1889 (1889, 474, 476-78).

H. P. Blavatsky proposes “Truth” as the goal of science, a truth she will claim in the name of occultism. Occult truths, having a spiritual origin in the distant past, are “changeless” and err only in details, not in fundamental laws (1988b, vol. I, 509, 516; vol. II, 366). As she presents a cyclic descent from spirituality into matter, an involution back to spirit, and a staggered evolutionary trajectory, she can place knowledgeable adepts in the distant past. These are sages who anticipated the modern sciences – sciences which only in their future form will be able to vindicate the ancients (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 117, 296, 506-7, 602, 612; vol. II, 253, 334, 451). We recall here the justifying link H. P. Blavatsky drew in *Isis Unveiled* between the séance phenomena of her day and the magic of the past.

For H. P. Blavatsky, Theosophy and occultism offer a reasonable position between theology and materialistic science, an opposition which only Theosophy can resolve (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 150, 322, 349). The sciences are “fallible” and a prominent technique she invoked to challenge scientific positions is to reference contradictions or disputes between and within scientific communities (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 279; vol. II, 316).<sup>54</sup> Blavatsky’s concerns about a reductive and materialistic science revolve around the idea that it cannot explain the inner psychic and spiritual nature of humanity. Materialistic science, by definition, confines itself to the material world, a premise or hypothesis that she suggests closes the mind to other explanatory theories or models (1988b, I, 133, 262, 464-65, 477, 600, 617, 620, 636; vol. II, 438, 592). She quotes *Webster’s Dictionary* for the definition of “empirical,” recording ““Depending upon experience or observation alone, *without due regard to modern science and theory*”” [Emphasis in the original]. She further adds, “This applies to the Occultists, Spiritualists, Mystics, etc., etc. Again, ‘An *Empiric* – One who confines himself to applying the results of his own observations’ (only)” (1988b, vol. II, 664). It may surprise the reader that this is essentially the definition of “empirical” in *Webster’s* which states, “1. Pertaining to, or founded upon, experiment or experience. 2. Depending upon experience or observation alone, without due regard to science and theory” (Webster 1872, 244). A more recent *Oxford English Dictionary* makes additional reference to “sense data” in its definition, the obvious omission in *Webster*. The omission assists Blavatsky’s claim that the adepts are empirical, though using “higher senses.” All this, I wish to stress again, is to be understood in relation to her position on spiritualistic and clairvoyant phenomena and the implications flowing from it.

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<sup>54</sup> It is, perhaps, ironic that there were also disputes within late nineteenth-century “esoteric” movements concerning, for example, the relation of “Western occultism” to “Eastern occultism.”



According to Blavatsky, a mask was deliberately thrown over the ancient scientific truths that pertained to the invisible side of humanity and nature. The truths of the world and humanity are hidden or coded in the myths of the world and now require the correct “keys” to unlock their content (1988b, vol. I, 304; vol. II, 130). She gives an example of this coded meaning in what one might call a technique of “substitution.” Commenting on a scientific article by Crookes she remarks, “Replace the chemical terms “Molecule,” “atom,” and “particle,” etc., by the words “Hosts,” “Monads,” “Devas,” etc., and one might think the genesis of the gods, the primeval evolution of manvantaric *intelligent* Forces, was being described” (1988b, vol. I, 548). The desire to ensure that these truths were not to be “desecrated” or shared with the “unworthy” was, in part, responsible for the establishment of a worldwide system of mystery schools and their attendant initiations.

H. P. Blavatsky’s engagement with evolutionary theories of her day continued in *The Secret Doctrine*, though in a more elaborate manner.<sup>55</sup> As my concern is with her enterprise in comparative religion this is not the place to present her observations in full, or to assess their place in late nineteenth-century speculations. Instead, I will outline a few of the general orienting positions as a background to her work in comparative religion. My entry point to these issues remains Blavatsky’s assessment of the spiritualistic phenomena. As these phenomena are evidence of an invisible world of intelligences, and of human existence after physical death, she cannot accept any solely materialistic version of evolution. Any theory of human or cosmic evolution must incorporate the “facts” of the séance room. Her partial rejection of an “Aristotelian/Baconian” method of inquiry in favour of a “Platonic/Pythagorean” one leads her to insist on a theory of universals and ideal forms, including of the human being (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 153; Barborka 1992, 143-47). She continues in her basic strategy of pointing to disputes between competing scientific accounts, which serves to both undermine the authority of scientific thought on one hand and, on the other, to boost her arguments where scientific speculation makes this possible. She, further, invokes an argument from design to challenge materialistic evolutionary theories (1988b, vol. II, 348). Blavatsky simultaneously appropriates and distances with statements flowing from, “Both Occult and Eastern philosophies believe in evolution” to, “But no Occultist can accept the unreasonable proposition” (1988b, vol. II, 259). A different metaphor will see her

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<sup>55</sup> Theosophical engagement with evolutionary science continued from the beginning of the Society’s existence to the present. As an instance, a relatively recent work is W. T. S. Thackara’s *Evolution & Creation: A Theosophic Synthesis* (2004).

involved in a process of re-weaving selected elements into a new narrative, that is, making *use* of selected data.

Blavatsky's general position, in continuity with *Isis Unveiled*, is that material (Darwinian) evolution is only half the story.<sup>56</sup> The broad parameters of her own presentation encompass a "double evolution in two contrary directions" in which spirit descends into matter, and physical development evolves from simple to complex forms. Evolutionary processes, additionally, happen on a spiritual, psychic, and material level (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 620; vol. II, 87, 109, 731). This pattern of cyclic descent and ascent is repeated throughout her system on both a cosmic and human level. *The Secret Doctrine* presents a number of other basic propositions, including a polygenetic origin of the humanity on seven different parts of the planet; that the astral body formed before the physical body; and, that "man" in the fourth round preceded the other mammals (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 1, 168).

We saw in *Isis Unveiled* that H. P. Blavatsky proposed the existence of an immaterial, primordial humanity. This idea is thoroughly worked out in *The Secret Doctrine* with her planetary chains, rounds, root-races, and family races teachings. On the origin of humanity she proposes Occult philosophy as a middle ground between science and religion and notes, "It teaches that the first human stock was projected by higher and semi-divine Beings out of their own essences" (1988b, vol. II, 87). There is an intricate series of homologies between the sevenfold Solar System, the sevenfold Planetary Chains and globes, and the individual seven-fold human being. This homology includes a sympathetic link between the hierarchies of the "gods" and intelligences and the sevenfold human constitution.

*The Secret Doctrine* concludes the topic of evolution with "five esoteric axioms" the acceptance of which, according to Blavatsky, would herald a welcome revolution in thought and dispel contemporary problems. In summary these five axioms are: the antiquity of the earth; the reality of the seven-fold rounds; the root-races teachings of which the "European race" is the fifth race; the great antiquity of humanity; and the cyclic evolutionary movement from ethereality to materiality and back again of all the kingdoms of nature *pari passu* with humanity (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 697). Intimately intertwined with these ideas are her teachings of the Monads which cycle through the various kingdoms of nature. In specific relation to human evolution are the Divine Monads, the Intellectual (*Agnishwāta Pitris*), and

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<sup>56</sup> "Half the story" may well have been a standard phrase among those positing a spiritual dimension to the world and humanity when discussing evolution. Oppenheim quotes Gerald Massey, writing in 1871, to just this effect (1985, 270).

the Physical or Lunar Pitris (*Barhishad Pitris*) (1988b, vol. I, 174-5, 181). We might also recall that the second volume of *The Secret Doctrine* is entitled Anthropogenesis and is devoted to human origins and history.

What is the relevance of these speculations on evolution to my thesis? H. P. Blavatsky will locate her statements about the world in the religious traditions and texts of the world. Challenging boundaries, her work suggests that all knowledge fields are to be assessed against the way the world really is. For H. P. Blavatsky, the study and purpose of religion is not separate from the sciences or philosophy. There is only one purpose for speculation, a movement towards the “truth” of things. A subsidiary purpose for detailing her orienting thoughts is to emphasise the rationality and coherence of her ideas once the underlying premises are brought to light. The development of her vocabulary further highlights her attempt to “cope” with the ideas with which she was grappling.

Blavatsky continues to stress the idea of an ancient wisdom tradition, however, of the many synonyms presented in *Isis Unveiled*, the *Secret Doctrine* emphasises those of a “secret doctrine,” “occultism,” “esoteric” philosophy, and Theosophy. A prominent later Theosophist, G. de Purucker, gives a definition of Theosophy which I quote in full as it neatly encapsulates what I have thus far been proposing characterises Blavatsky’s work,

Theosophy. A compound Greek word: *theos*, a “divine being,” a “god”; *sophia*, “wisdom”; hence Divine Wisdom. Theosophy is the majestic Wisdom-Religion of the archaic ages and is as old as thinking man. It was delivered to the first human protoplasts, the first thinking human beings on this Earth, by highly intelligent spiritual Entities from superior spheres. This Ancient Doctrine, this Esoteric System, has been passed down from guardians to guardians to guardians through innumerable generations until our own time; and, furthermore, portions of this original and majestic System have been given out at various periods of time to various races in various parts of the world by those Guardians when humanity stood in need of such extension and elaboration of spiritual and intellectual thought.

Theosophy is not a syncretistic philosophy-religion-science: that is to say a system of thought or belief which has been put together piecemeal and consisting of parts or portions taken by some great mind from other various religions or philosophies. This idea is repudiated by Theosophists, for the simple reason that it is not true. On the contrary, Theosophy is that single System or systematic formulation of the facts of visible and invisible Nature, which, as expressed through the illuminated human

mind, takes the apparently separate forms of science and of philosophy and of religion. We may likewise describe Theosophy to be the formulation in human language of the nature, structure, origin, destiny, and operations of the Kosmical Universe and of the multitudes of beings which infill it.

It might be added that Theosophy, in the language of H. P. Blavatsky, is “the substratum and basis of all the world-religions and philosophies, taught and practised by the few elect ever since man became a thinking being. In its practical bearing, Theosophy is purely *divine ethics*; the definitions in dictionaries are pure nonsense, based on religious prejudice and ignorance.” (See her posthumous work, *Theosophical Glossary*, page 328) (1933, 177-78)

Theosophy is positioned as a body of propositional statements about the nature of the universe, the individual, and of the history of humanity. For H. P. Blavatsky the secret doctrine is the “accumulated Wisdom of the Ages,” a phrase we have met before in her writings.<sup>57</sup> This system is: the most “stupendous” and “elaborate;” is hidden under “Occult symbolism;” is a body of “facts” recorded by the “flashing gaze of those seers;” is the “uninterrupted record covering thousands of generations of Seers whose respective experiences were made to test and to verify the traditions passed orally by one early race to another;” its logical doctrines were learnt, checked, tested, confirmed, and verified in every department (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 272-73; vol. II, 3). It is presented, in short, in opposition to and in continuity with late nineteenth-century science, religion, and philosophy.

Continuing the themes of *Isis Unveiled*, the secret doctrine is the “Parent Doctrine” which is the “one fountain head, the ever-flowing perennial source, at which were fed all its streamlets – the late religions of all nations – from the first down to the last” (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, xlv-xlv). It is the common property of humanity and reconciles world religions, a “thread doctrine;” its dogmas are unaltered, and its primitive truths shine through exoteric religions for those with the interpretive keys (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 77, 312, 678, 610; vol. II, 794). Importantly, Blavatsky writes, “The Secret Doctrine, correcting the unavoidable exaggerations of popular fancy, gives the facts as they are recorded in the Archaic symbols” (1988b, vol. II, 96). Correcting and corrective, this is my estimation of the Theosophical template. Its interpretive patterns sift the wheat from the chaff, the Theosophical method leaving only the facts and truths of nature and humanity.

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<sup>57</sup> A distinction is to be made between the “secret doctrine” as the body of all truths of the ancient wisdom tradition, and the book by H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, which is a selection of these truths presented for publication. When the term is italicised I am referring to the book by H. P. Blavatsky.

## 5) ORIGINS

I want to draw together a number of related themes found in H. P. Blavatsky's writings on religion. These include recovering her conception of religion, the origin and beginning of religion and individual religions, and the historical spread of religion.

I have argued that Blavatsky presents her Theosophical statements as a body of true propositions about the world and humanity. For Blavatsky, the world preceded any propositional expression, symbolisation, or communication and exists independently of our linguistic descriptions. Despite its limitations, language can accurately describe the reality of the associated manifested planes on which it is used.<sup>58</sup> If these privileged descriptions were not possible it is difficult to explain the corrective and correcting nature of the Theosophical enterprise. Sanskrit is the language most perfectly developed to express the truth of things, other languages being less evolved and of humbler origins. Theosophy is, then, the expression of the "Truth" in any language and, we might add, on any plane. This conception explains two sentences found in *The Secret Doctrine*: "The silent worship of abstract or *noumenal* Nature, the only divine manifestation, is the one ennobling religion of Humanity," and "Finally, that no human-born doctrine, no creed, however sanctified by custom and antiquity, can compare in sacredness to the religion of Nature" (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 381; vol. II, 797). The worship of "noumenal" nature, that is nature as it is in itself, the "religion of nature," is a "worship" of the way the world is, the Truth of the world in its essence. We should not become confused at this point. Theosophy, in Blavatsky's conception, is not a "human" dogma.<sup>59</sup> "Human" in this context would be the human being at the evolutionary stage of lower mental development, the Theosophical *kama-manas*. The origins of religion are far superior and she has a very specific idea of what "divine origin" means. It is not revelation from a "God," it is a "language and system of science imparted to the early mankind by a more advanced *mankind*" [Italics in the original] (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 309). We can see her struggling with these concepts when she not only suggests that exoteric doctrines are allegorical, but that esoteric teachings (Theosophy) are to "some extent" also

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<sup>58</sup>Blavatsky sets up an opposition between absolute reality and the manifested world of illusion. To perceiving beings in the worlds of manifestation unreal objects (unreal in relation to absolute reality) will appear as real. On each plane, objects on that plane appear as real to the perceptive consciousness on the same plane. In this sense, there is a correct description of events and objects that occur and appear on each plane (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 328-9).

<sup>59</sup>Blavatsky makes constant references to "dogmas," human, esoteric, and others. A defining statement is contained in a reply to a point made by Solovyov, an early critic of Theosophy. She writes "Mr. Solovyov should also know that 'Theosophy' is not '*a religion without definite dogmas*,' as he expresses it, but is *a universal system of philosophy*, absolutely without any *man-made dogmas*" (1980, 341). [Italics in the original].

allegorical or *semi*-metaphysical (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 81). It is only the spirit that can “see” the real spiritual world. She is aware, then, of the limits of language though marks esoteric statements as a special case. Boris de Zirkoff, echoing this writes, “It is well to remember this, and to keep constantly in mind that Theosophy is Truth, though expressed in human language, however inadequate it may be” (1983, 37). At least one academic reflects a similar reading of Blavatsky. James A. Santucci notes that she speaks “*ex cathedra*” and that the ancient wisdom, according to her, comprises “Truth as it really is, not what it should be” (Santucci 2007, 1).

The nascent human is initially an unconscious spiritual being, in instant and direct harmony with the inner planes. This unconscious spiritual state equates to the two higher Theosophical human principles, *atman* and *buddhi*, and with the first two root-races. At a certain point in its evolutionary journey humanity’s instinctive and intuitive link to the inner planes and the inner self was lost. Before this loss, this descent of spirit into matter, there would have been no need for the communication and preservation of truth. The intuitive link to the divine would have been present until the awakening of the *kama-manas*, or the lower mind. This is the later third root-race and its bridges into the fourth root-race. Blavatsky suggests that the first two root-races, the early part of the third root-race, and parts of the link from the third to the fourth root-race knew no “religion, if religion is understood as dogma, belief by faith, or any system of ‘outward worship’” (1988b, vol. II, 272). She notes, that if by “religion” is meant “the binding together of the masses in one form of reverence paid to those we feel higher than ourselves, of piety – as a feeling expressed by a child toward a loved parent – then even the earliest Lemurians had a religion” (1988b, vol. II, 272). Blavatsky has in more than one place presented the idea of religion as a “bond” (1984, 99; 1988, 161-63). Each passage should be read carefully in context. What strikes me is that any idea of a “bond” in her writings bears little resemblance to contemporary sociological theories of religion. The bond she presents is one that unites the inanimate world, humanity, and the invisible realms into one whole. That is, it includes the ontological reality of these invisible worlds, to which one is bound. It is rooted, then, in the reality of spiritualist phenomena and its associated concepts. I suggest, however, that this is not Blavatsky’s primary understanding of religion, which instead revolves around a body of Truths about Nature. For her, all the knowledge about the world that Theosophy attempted to restore to the nineteenth century was innate in the early stages of humanity’s evolutionary development. Our story, then, begins with this loss, the descent into matter, in short, with the Theosophical third root-race.

The events of the third root-race are central to the history of humanity. It is no coincidence that the third root-race is associated with the awakening of mind and consciousness in humanity, the very problem around which many nineteenth-century debates were revolving. While other important events occurred in this root-race, for example, the differentiation of humanity into male and female from an earlier sexless and then androgynous state and the increasing materialisation of the human form, I will highlight the issues surrounding the development of the mind. In brief, Blavatsky presents a story in which, according to karmic law, beings (*mānasaputras*) from a higher plane descended and were involved in the “quickenings” of humanity’s latent mental principle.<sup>60</sup> These beings, on their own evolutionary journey, were of various classes and “incarnated” into the human races in staggered stages. The differing degrees of awakening are an explanation for the supposed varying intellectual development found in humanity around the world.<sup>61</sup> Blavatsky saw evidence of this historical “descent” of divine beings portrayed in the myths of “fallen angels,” of Prometheus, in the Hermetic tracts, and elsewhere. To become “rational” or “conscious” is a necessary descent from the early unconscious, spiritual state of the early races. The “fall” of humanity in, for example, the Biblical tradition is part of the evolutionary cycle of beings. A fallen, and now conscious, humanity is given free will to continue evolving with the end of transcending the “human” mental stage and becoming consciously spiritual. Humanity, then, ends where it began, with the difference that the final state of the fully evolved human is *conscious* spirituality. While this may seem obscure, the point, for my purposes, is that the loss of an intuitive direct contact with nature, the closing of the “third eye,” heralded the need for training and initiation for real knowledge to be gained. The mystery schools and their shadow, the “religions” of the world, have their origin in this loss of a primordial innate spirituality (Purucker 1974, 4, 473).

The divine beings of myth and tradition, instructors of humanity are, for H. P. Blavatsky, no myths. They are a part of the evolutionary history of the human race, and she will trace them through the scriptures of the world. The initial purity of the wisdom brought down gradually degenerated into sorcery and exotericism as humanity continued its general cycle of descent into matter in the fourth root-race. A certain “elect” group, however, became a fountain of

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<sup>60</sup> G. A. Barborka defines *mānasaputras* as the “Sons of Mind,” or “Sons of Mahat” (1992, 295). Mahat is the fifth Theosophical plane counting upwards, the mental plane, with mind (*manas*) being the fifth human principle counting upwards. See G. de Purucker’s *Man in Evolution* (1977) and *Fountain-source of Occultism* (1974, 481-3) for brief discussions of this event.

<sup>61</sup> For a discussion of H. P. Blavatsky and racism see, Santucci “The Notion of Race in Theosophy” (2008), and Lubelsky “Mythological and real Race issues in Theosophy” (2013).

purity from which Truth was drawn in various ages and by various races (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 281). Two strands of “religion” are traced through the end of the third root-race (Lemurians) to the fourth root-race (Atlanteans), that of the esoteric or wisdom religion and that of the exoteric religions. Exoteric religions are characterised by phallicism, sexual symbology, sorcery, anthropomorphism, materialism, ritualistic pomp, idolatry, dogmatism, and false statements about the world.

While more could be said about Lemurians and Atlanteans in Theosophical speculation I want to move the discussion to H. P. Blavatsky’s statements on the recognized historical religions. From their “Lemuro-Atlantean” origins the oldest religions are the Indian (Vedic), including Buddhism, Mazdean, Egyptian, and Chaldean (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 10, 376, 668-9; II, 483). Following these would be the Semitic religions, for example, Judaism and its offshoot, Christianity (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 311, 318). The further one moves from the Eastern origin the less esoteric lore is contained in a religion. Eastern occultism, for example, contains all seven interpretive keys, while Judaism contains at best two. The general historical movement is from the East and Central Asia to the West. This is a diffusionistic theory of religious development. At one level, new religions draw on the material of older existing religions. The statements are re-worked and re-presented in the language and cultural idioms of the new peoples. At the same time, founders of religion are, according to Blavatsky, “transmitters” of the ancient wisdom of the past. New initiates present larger or lesser portions of the complete wisdom tradition to their own communities (1988b, vol. I, xxxvi). The spread of religion, then, moves at two levels: the esoteric and exoteric. What distinguishes them is simply that one is conveying the truth, while the other is not. They are both historical movements in time and space. This dual movement is, in part, Blavatsky’s attempt to explain the existence of the underlying patterns she has identified in the religions of the world.

The way in which the truths were carried across geography and time is via the mystery schools and initiation. The “immutable truths” of esotericism are revealed only during initiation to the worthy, due to their power and to prevent abuse. Initiation is a quickening of evolution and heralds an awakening. Those older souls and those who strive to progress spiritually will move ahead of the general body of humankind. The “mass” of humanity is destined to attain the same level of spiritual awareness as an initiate, though they will do so at a much later date in time. The natural course of evolution is towards perfection of each type or species. In this sense Blavatsky’s theories embrace a “psychological” origin. Each human



being contains within them the totality of knowledge accessible to that type of being. Some will become aware of it early through initiation, while others will naturally awaken to it in the slow course of evolution. Exoteric truths are alterable, amendable, and the result of corruption, degeneration, and deliberate encoding. It is of interest that Blavatsky suggests that outside of initiation the esoteric truths cannot be known. There are barriers to do with one's intellectual and cultural environment, which prevents thought to reach the highest truths (1988b, vol. I, 326). She will, however, periodically refer to "half-initiated" adepts, for example, P. B. Randolph and A. S. Mackay who, without the benefit of initiation, grasped certain truths through their own effort. Often, however, even these non-initiates were secretly inspired by the *mahatmas* for various reasons of their own. Blavatsky does, however, concede the physical world to science in many respects, and links her domain of interest with that of the "psychic," the "spiritual," and the "psychological" (1988b, vol. I, 229). For Blavatsky, the "adepts" of the past have solved the mysteries with which her contemporary science grappled (for example, death), and these truths are released when humanity has the capacity to understand them (1988b, vol. II, 451). The carrier medium of these esoteric truths is the "mystery language," *Senzar*. John Algeo has comprehensively reviewed *Senzar* in his work, *Senzar: The Mystery of the Mystery Language* (1988). This mystery language is symbolical, pictorial, geometrical, and numerical. It was once a universal tongue which was understood by the adepts of all nations. The symbols of this language are multi-faceted having seven modes of expression and H. P. Blavatsky notes that the various theologies were attempts to interpret or present this language. *The Secret Doctrine* is an attempt to present an interpretation of this symbolical language to the public.

H. P. Blavatsky's study of religions, her "institution of comparisons," led her to see an "identity of thought and meaning" and a "striking similitude of conception," suggesting a "concurrent design" (1988b, vol. I, 318, 341; vol. II, 516). These conceptions lead into her enterprise in comparative religion. She presents the patterns - the underlying template and grid - which her research uncovered. While she may well attribute her work to initiation and Eastern adepts, we cannot embrace this explanation in the current academic climate. I suggest that in the academic environment in which we exist we must present her work as the fruit of her research, with plagiarism being the other option, an option I challenge. The identical pattern she recognized in the religions she examined is the universal wisdom tradition, or Theosophy, as she presented it. It is to the specifics of her comparative religion enterprise in *The Secret Doctrine* that I now turn.

## 6) COMPARING RELIGIONS

It is not within the scope of this study to investigate H. P. Blavatsky's engagement with any particular religion. I am interested, here, in her general interpretive orientation towards religious texts.

### 6.1) Structural Patterning

I have proposed that the underlying harmonising force in H. P. Blavatsky's interpretive strategy is derived from structural pattern identification. It is my argument that she presented a template or grid against which the religions of the world were measured. This grid is the product of an epistemic code common to the time and is supported by a number of interpretive movements, including a functional patterning, symbolism, esoteric/exoteric distinction, and so on. In this section I focus on a number of diagrams and tables found in *The Secret Doctrine* which represent the parameters of the Theosophical template. Diagrams are one form in which the Theosophical scheme can be represented. This template can also be represented in prose form, and the totality of the written statements of Blavatsky on the relevant topics would form the paradigm, the limit, the content, and the details of the ideal and primordial religion.

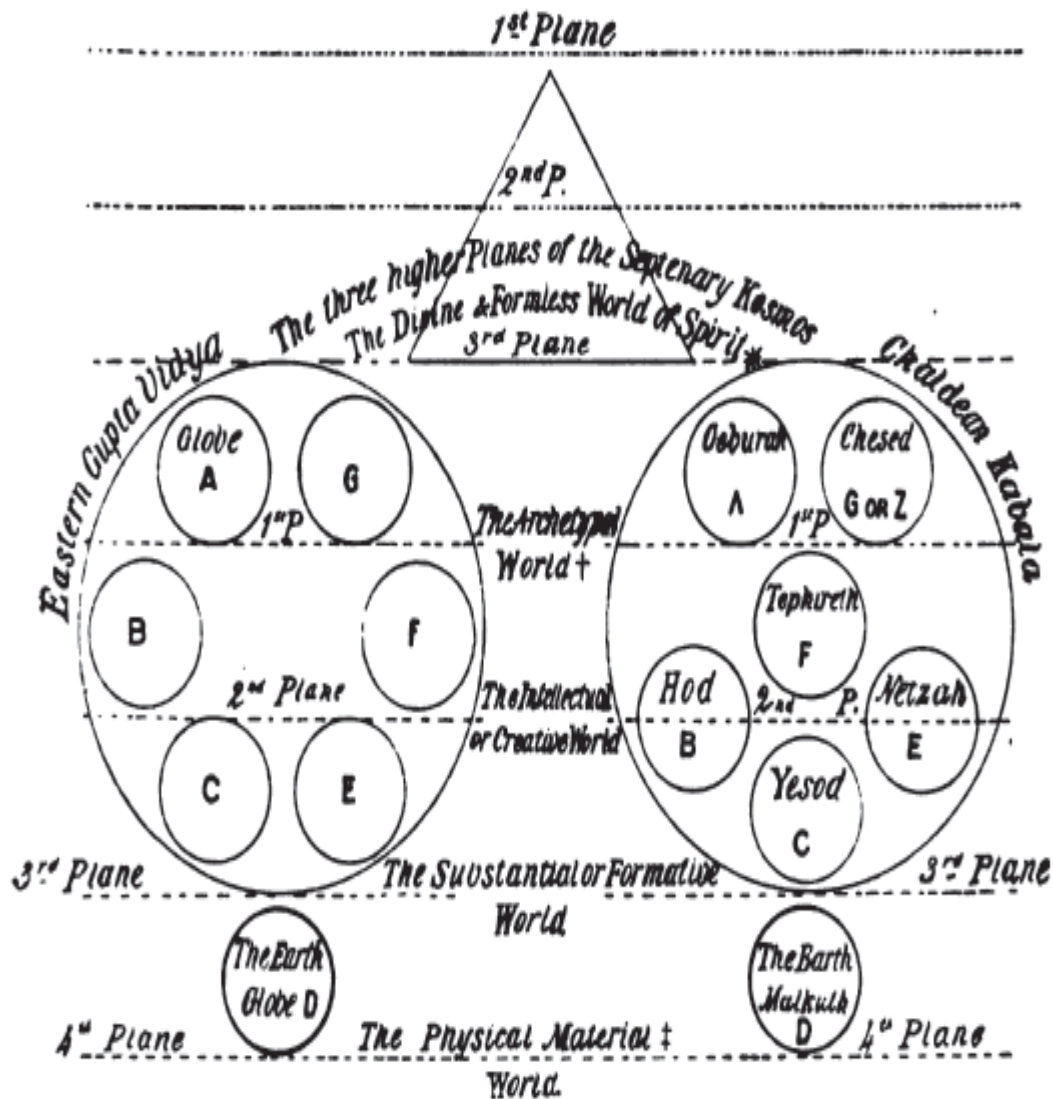
In prose form the basic parameters might specifically include the Three Fundamental Propositions and the points presented in the "Summing Up" section of *The Secret Doctrine* (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 14, 16-7, 269-80). Almost any attempt to present the foundations, generalise the structure, or distil the essence of Blavatsky's ideas becomes, due to the nature of her work, a sketch of the original and complete religion and, therefore, an exercise in Theosophical comparative religion.<sup>62</sup> Each basic dimension of the framework proposed is then sought in the doctrines of the world religions. In this way, her writings challenge, or transgress, the boundary between doctrinal presentation and the study of religion. We note, also, that these statements are claims about the world. This reintroduces her work into the sphere of the sciences, when the latter are conceived of as a body of statements about the world.

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<sup>62</sup> There are many such attempts, two examples of which are Barborka's various "Laws", and Hoskins' "foundation" principles of Theosophy (Barborka 1992, 3-4; Hoskins 1982).

Diagram one:

The first diagram is the fundamental diagram of H. P. Blavatsky's Theosophy, with various later Theosophists presenting versions or elaborations of this basic picture.



(Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 200)

I suggest that this diagram is the settled form of the "Two Page Diagram" from *Isis Unveiled* that I presented in chapter two. Both works, *The Secret Doctrine* and *Isis Unveiled*, present their diagrams in an Eastern and Western version, and plotted on these diagrams can be found the entire Theosophical statement in relation to the cosmos, creation, and the evolution of humanity and other kingdoms of nature in the solar system and on earth. Though the present diagram can represent the earth, the solar system, and in a generalised sense the universe in

the abstract, *The Secret Doctrine* deals primarily with the solar system and the earth planetary chain (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 13, 20-21, 60; vol. II, 700).<sup>63</sup> In broad terms we see the seven planes with an emanation, unfolding, evolving, or radiating from the spiritual to the material. While only the last division of the physical plane is objective to us, in Theosophical thought the first three planes are regarded as unmanifested and the bottom four are regarded as manifested. The first three planes can also be represented by the concept of the Three Logoi, the last of which, the creative logos, produces the seven rays or globes. If the diagram is indicative of the solar system the seven globes would represent the planets. If the diagram is indicative of the earth planetary chain (a seven-fold or seven-principled planet) then the globes represent the various principles of the earth. When referencing human evolution the descending arc of evolution would be represented by the globes A to D. Globe D is the bottom of the cycle, the most material period and state, and globes E to G would represent the ascending arc of involution. While not shown on the diagram it is understood that each plane is seven-fold, as is each globe. The general principle of human evolution would be that of a movement from unconscious god-spark to self-conscious god-spark, a descent into materiality followed by an ascent into perfection. The importance of this diagram is that the doctrines of religions can be plotted onto it. Creative deities, for example, would correspond to the third plane and third Logos. *The Secret Doctrine* is a detailed commentary, in the Theosophical vocabulary, on the dimensions of this diagram and how the world religions fit onto it. *The Secret Doctrine* is, among other things, a broad exercise in comparative religion and in interpreting religion.

Geoffrey A. Barborka presents a list of equivalent terms which include those from the Theosophical vocabulary and various religions of the world. As an instance, I reproduce those dealing with “Ākāśa (Sanskrit – Trans-Himalayan)”,

Pre-Cosmic Substance, Primordial Cosmic Substance, Aditi (Vedic), Mūlaprakriti (Vedantin), Pre-Cosmic Root-Matter, Primordial Root-Matter, Pradhāna (Brahmanical), Svabhavat (Northern Buddhistic), Father-Mother (Stanzas), Alaya (Northern Buddhistic), Zeruana (Mazdean), Bythos (Gnostic), Chaos or Chaino (Greek), “Waters” (Bible-Genesis), Deities: Neith or Nut (Egyptian), Anaita (Assyria), Nerfe (Etruscan). (1992, 482)

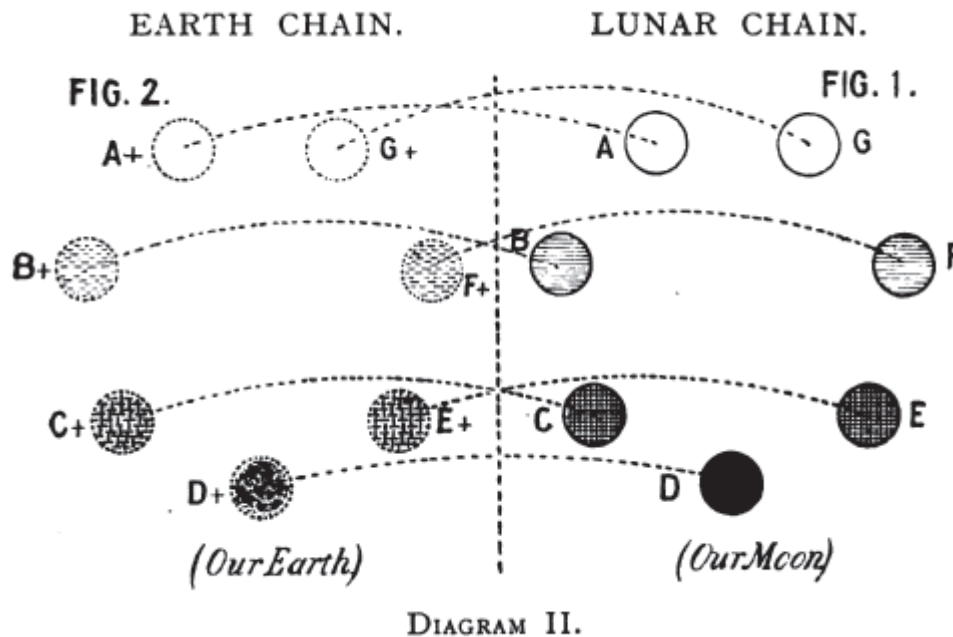
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<sup>63</sup> H. P. Blavatsky notes that the “The history of cosmic evolution, as traced in the Stanzas, is, so to say, the abstract algebraical formula of that Evolution” (1988b, vol. I, 20).

On the diagram these would be represented by the white page in the background. It is the matrix from which the First Logos (the first plane), the point in the circle, is said to radiate or emanate. There are, of course, many synonyms for this First Logos, including *Brahman*, *Kether*, etc. In every religion Theosophy will attempt to locate a hidden deity behind the creative powers of the Third Logos and where no such concept can be found that religion will be judged to be deficient or limited. It is not always the case that every religion has every aspect of the template hidden in it. Some religions have more of the original body of truths than others. Some religions are simply deficient of the “higher” and more esoteric doctrines, and Theosophy then augments those traditions. In general these are the Western religions as opposed to the Eastern religions, which are historically older and nearer the primordial source, according to Blavatsky.

There is flexibility in this diagram, which enhances its interpretive power, for example, various meaning-laden numbers can be read into it. G. de Purucker, for instance, plotted twelve globes across the seven planes by adding 5 globes spread across the three higher planes. This is presented as an extension of the esoteric wisdom. Theosophists searched religious texts for key numbers, 1, 3, 7, 10, 12, and many others, through which Theosophical content could be inserted.

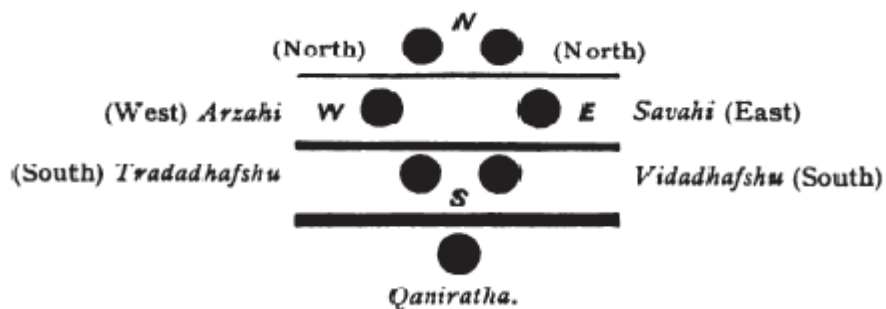
Diagram two:



(Blavatsky 1988b, vol. 1,172)

This diagram portrays two planetary chains, the Earth and the Moon. A planetary chain is a seven-principled planet, each globe corresponding to a human principle. The bottom globe (D) of each chain is the physical earth and physical moon. The remaining globes are the inner principles of the planet. We can note the globes spread over the four lower planes of the first diagram. The purpose of this diagram is to show the “life-waves” transferring from the Moon planetary chain to the Earth chain.

Diagram three:



(Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 759)

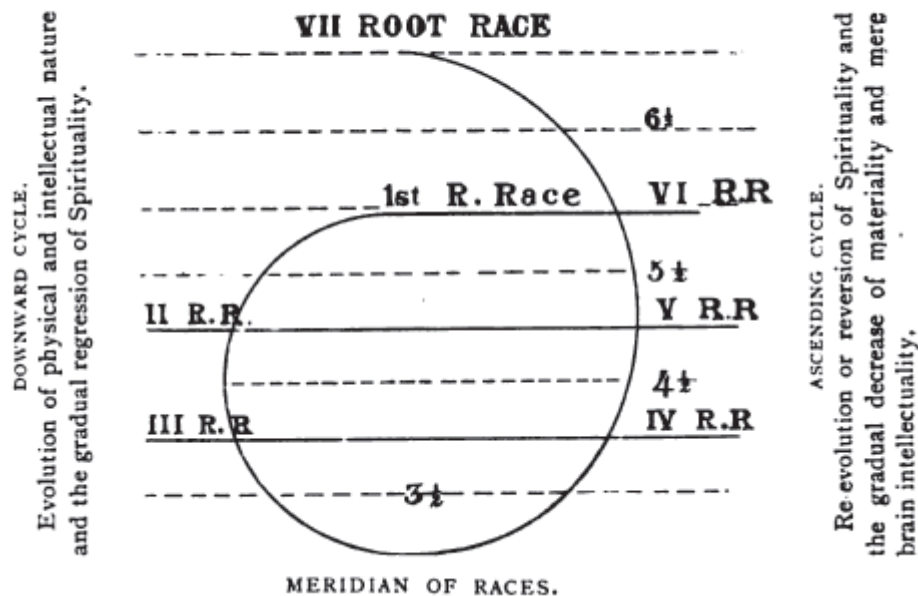
I insert this diagram as an illustration of how H. P. Blavatsky maps religious doctrines onto the Theosophical template. In this instance she is mapping the “Mazdean” terms onto the basic theosophical grouping of the globes and planes. We have already noted the link H. P. Blavatsky has drawn between the Kabbalistic *Sephiroth* of the Tree of Life and the Theosophical planes and globes. She will locate her globe teachings in many traditions, including, as a favoured example, the *Purāṇas*. She equates, for instance, *Jambu-dwipa* with the lowest globe (1988b, vol. II, 320). The Theosophical planes are read into world traditions in much the same way the seven *lokas* of the *Purāṇas*, *bhur*, *bhuva*, *svar*, *mahar*, *janar*, *tapar*, and *satya lokas* are read from material to spiritual on the Theosophical template. This allows Theosophists to interpret, as an instance, the *Gayatri* in a Theosophical sense, while using the exact terminology of its native tradition. H. P. Blavatsky found a reason to look at ancient (and contemporary) religious traditions and myths for historical data and information.<sup>64</sup> The foundation of this was the reality of the séance phenomena. Once she began looking to the past she drew on the new source material to elaborate her scheme. There is, then, a reciprocal movement between the past and present, all under the sway of H. P. Blavatsky’s synthesising mind which was engaged in identifying underlying patterns.

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<sup>64</sup> The Theosophical engagement with religion in the late nineteenth century presents, therefore, a counter-example to Hans Penner’s notion that one does not read myths for true (whatever this may mean, and this, surely, is an important question) information. One may well read a myth for true information if one’s interpretive paradigm allows it (Penner 2002, 153-70).

Diagram four:

# EVOLUTION OF ROOT RACES IN THE FOURTH ROUND.



(Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 300)

Diagram four reflects the full Theosophical vocabulary of Rounds and Root-races. According to Blavatsky we are in the Fourth Round and Fifth Root-race. One round is a single cycle of the seven globes. Being in the Fourth Round, humanity is unfolding its fourth, or *kama* (desire), principle. We are, however, in the fifth stage of our evolution in this round, the fifth Root-race, which means we are unfolding the fifth, *manas* (mind), principle. Humanity, in general, is unfolding the mental aspect (fifth sub-principle) of its desire principle (fourth principle). Linked to the Root-races are the continental geographic distributions. The first race is linked to the "Sacred Land," the second with the "Hyperborean," the third with "Lemuria," the fourth with "Atlantis," the fifth, our own race, with Europe and the Americas (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 6-8).



Table 1:

CLASSIFICATION IN ESOTERIC BUDDHISM.	VEDANTIC CLASSIFICATION.	CLASSIFICATION IN TARAKA RAJA YOGA.
1. Sthula Sarira.	Annamaya kosa.*	Sthulopadhi.§
2. Prana.†	Pranamaya kosa.	
3. The vehicle of Prana.‡		
4. Kama Rupa.	Manomaya kosa.	Sukshmopadhi.
5. Mind { (a) Volitions and feelings, etc.		
(b) Vignanam.	Vignanamaya kosa.	
6. Spiritual Soul.	Anandamaya kosa.	Karanopadhi.
7. Atma.	Atma.	Atma.

(Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 157)

Table one shows the how the seven-fold principles of the individual can be presented in both a six- and four-fold classificatory system. The seven principles could also be presented in a two-fold (spirit/body), three-fold (spirit, soul, body), and five-fold classification. Blavatsky suggested that for meditational purposes one may use a three-fold or four-fold classification, but for “*practical occult teaching*” the seven-fold is required (1988b, vol. II, 593). The point to be stressed here is that the terminology of different religions can be converted into the technical language and structure of Theosophy.

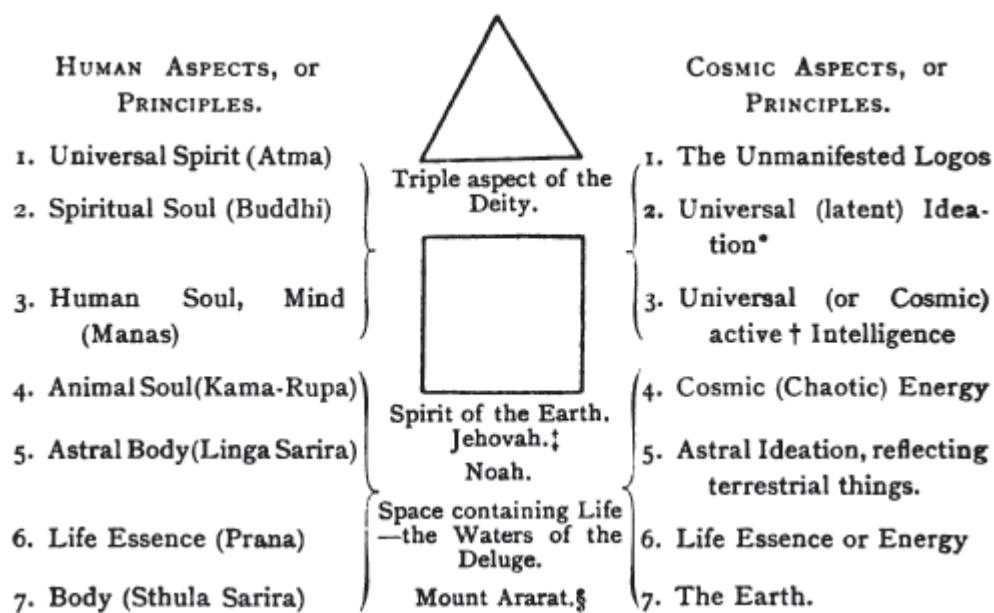
Table 2:

(Esoteric) Indian.	Egyptian.
1. Rupa, body or element of form.	1. Kha, body.
2. Prana, the breath of life.	2. Ba, the Soul of Breath.
3. Astral body.	3. Khaba, the shade.
4. Manas—or Intelligence.*	4. Akhu, Intelligence or Perception.
5. Kama—rupa, or animal soul.	5. Seb, ancestral Soul.
6. Buddhi, Spiritual Soul.	6. Putah, the first intellectual father.
7. Atma, pure spirit. . . .	7. Atmu, a divine or eternal soul.

(Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 632)

Table two presents the Theosophical and the Egyptian series of principles. For Blavatsky, when Egyptians speak of the *Kha* we need simply replace that with the Theosophical *Rupa* or body. With this “translation” a complete Theosophical system is inserted into the Egyptian religion. I have discussed this more fully in an earlier work (Bester 2012).

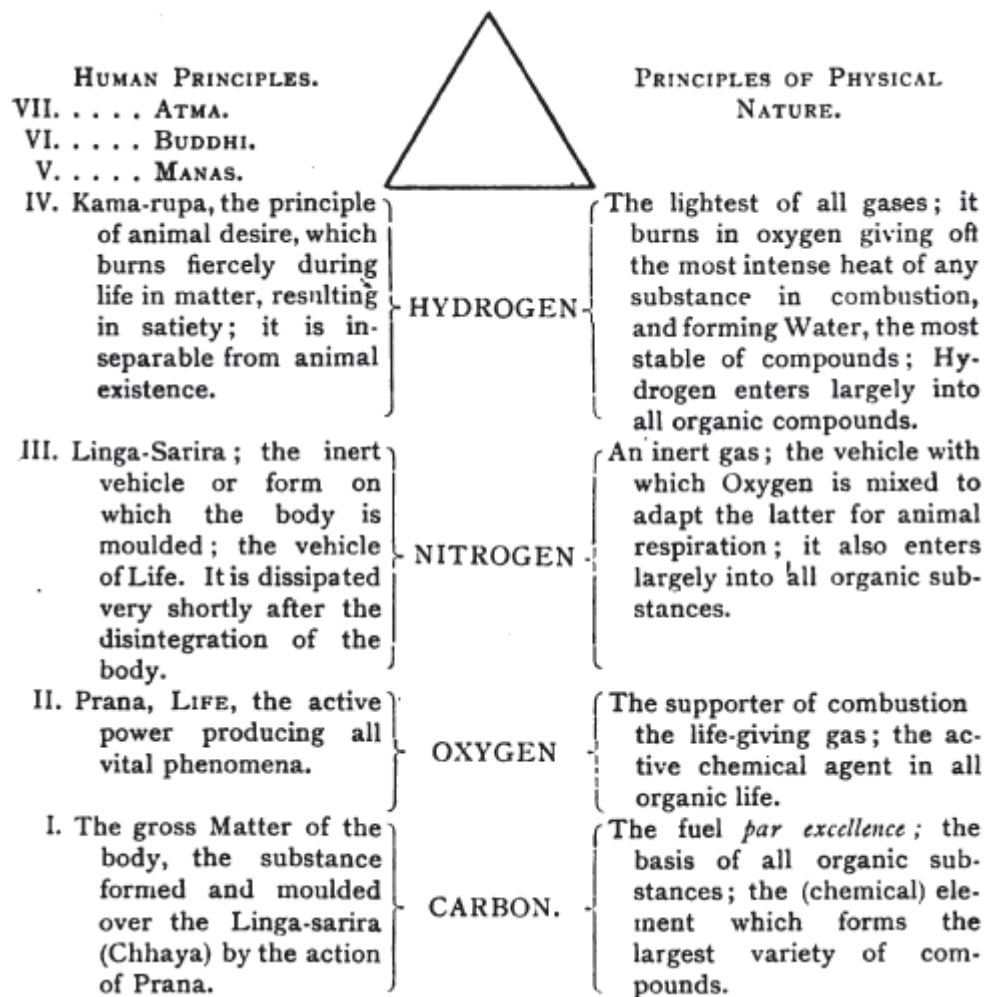
Diagram 5:



(Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 596)

This fifth diagram links the human principles (microcosm) to the cosmic principles (macrocosm).

Diagram 6:



(Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 593)

Diagram six correlates the four lower human principles to elements in nature.

These diagrams and tables represent the parameters and skeleton of Blavatsky's Theosophical template. The basic dimensions of creation, the individual, and of human history are displayed through these representations. They are woven into a tight, interrelated system (with an attendant vocabulary) in which the patterns are linked in such a way that forces certain structures. This is the foundation of her comparative religion enterprise. Blavatsky has spent thousands of pages of writing, not to mention the vast array of later commentators on her ideas, fleshing out and explaining her concepts. Her works are, among other things, a reading of the religions of the world in the light of this template. I have attempted a bare-bones presentation of the Theosophical system by focusing on the diagrams. Diagrams are a fundamental component of her presentation strategy. In her Inner Group teachings and

Esoteric Section writings the diagrams and tables of correspondences become increasingly elaborate. By focusing on the diagrammatic representation of the Theosophical wisdom tradition I have tried to avoid being accused of doing Theosophical “theology” in the place of a serious study of Theosophy. It should be clear, however, that it is my position that Blavatsky’s works challenge any such settled distinction.

While the structural patterning is the basis of Blavatsky’s interpretive enterprise, it is supported by many attendant techniques. An important supporting technique is the creating of equivalencies based on function. Creative deities are representative of one such functional correspondence. A second, of many possible examples, is the correspondence of the Theosophical *Fohat* with the Egyptian *Atum* (*Toum* in H. P. Blavatsky’s writings) which I have discussed in an earlier writing (Bester 2012).

## 6.2) Texts are Interpretable

The interpretive manoeuvres of *The Secret Doctrine* are in many ways a repetition of those in *Isis Unveiled*. Rooted in the basic distinction between exoteric and esoteric H. P. Blavatsky proposes that religious texts require interpretation to be properly understood. She notes,

There is no purely *mythical* element in any of the ancient religious texts; but the mode of thought in which they were originally written has to be found out and closely adhered to during the process of interpretation. For, it is either symbolical (archaic mode of thought), emblematical (a later though very ancient mode of thought), parabolical (allegory), hieroglyphical, or again *logogrammaical* – the most difficult method of all, as every letter, as in the Chinese language, represents a whole word. (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 335)

In Blavatsky’s conception, religious texts are deliberately allegorical and symbolical, not overtly revealing their intended message. Religious texts should not be read literally (though literal esoteric truth statements may be found), and under almost every myth and legend is a historical fact or a truth about the nature of the world or humanity. A primary technique claimed by her is that of analogy; she writes,

The law of Analogy is the first key to the world-problem, and these links have to be studied co-ordinately in their occult relations to each other. (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 604)

And

*Analogy* is the guiding law in Nature, the only true Ariadne's thread that can lead us, through the inextricable paths of her domain, toward her primal and final mysteries. (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 153)

A consequence of her structuring insights is a conscious analogical patterning underlying her microcosmic and macrocosmic speculations. Blavatsky used the principle of analogy in a unique way to link the stages of growth and development in a wide variety of contexts, including the development of the foetus, the constitution of the individual, and the evolution of a planetary chain, solar system, and the cosmos as a whole. Analogy is a strategy with use well beyond the esoteric domain. Purrington notes the use of analogy in nineteenth-century physics by scientists such as James Clerk Maxwell, Michael Faraday, and others (1997, 27-29). The use of analogy and pattern recognition in the field of comparative religion is referenced by Strenski in relation to Max Müller and James Frazer, and by David Chidester in relation to E. B. Tylor (Strenski 2006, 137; Chidester 1996, 1; 2014, 93).

Texts are also characterised by having “blinds.” Blinds, we gather, intentionally conceal mystery teachings and divert attention from prying and undeserving eyes. In addition to the inevitable decline in religious understanding associated with the passing of time, the founding sages of religion have also purposely concealed their true teachings from the masses. It is of little wonder, then, that Blavatsky would turn to Gnostic, Kabbalistic, and Mahayana traditions. That there are “secret” commentaries presenting the “real” message of the founders is basic to these traditions. We might conclude that H. P. Blavatsky had quite correctly noted this tension within religious history itself. Her specific contribution is the *content*, the body of truths she calls Theosophy, reflected in the pattern that she unveils.

### 6.3) Seven Keys

If the real meaning of religious texts is “locked” within the texts, then clearly a “key” is required. This is a metaphor H. P. Blavatsky frequently exploits. Regrettably, for all the prominence of this metaphor, she nowhere concisely outlines the nature of these keys. What

follows is an attempt to categorise the hints and scattered statements she has left in *The Secret Doctrine* concerning both these keys and other related interpretive tools.<sup>65</sup>

As a basic background statement, Blavatsky asserts that there are seven keys to interpreting texts. Of these keys it is only “Eastern Occultism” which still retains knowledge of all seven. According to her, even the *Vedas* are “not complete” in this respect (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 318). No exoteric tradition, not even an Eastern one, has the completeness of the occult tradition. Different traditions may retain knowledge of a few of the keys and specific mention is made of Judaism which has two of the seven keys (1988b, vol. I, 318). Thus far, we are anticipating seven keys to be presented. Before continuing this line of thought I turn to alternate, though seemingly related, interpretive manoeuvres and terminology.

The first is Blavatsky’s notion that religious deities were simultaneous “septiform personations” of: “the *noumena* of intelligent Powers of nature;” of “Cosmic Forces;” of “celestial bodies;” of “gods or Dhyan Chohans;” of “psychic and spiritual powers;” of “divine kings on earth (or the incarnations of the gods);” and of “terrestrial heroes or men” (1988b, vol. II, 765). A deity, then, can be read in seven ways or contexts. This is presented as a “symbolical and allegorical system.” Secondly, H. P. Blavatsky writes of each symbol having seven meanings. Each of these meanings is appropriate to its own plane of thought. She lists, however, only four of these planes of thought: the metaphysical, the astronomical, the psychic, and the physiological (1988b, vol. II, 538). Thirdly, while discussing a specific symbol, the “*Svastica*,” she suggests that its symbolism pertains to both the cosmological and anthropological spheres. She writes that it is, “at one and the same time an Alchemical, Cosmological, Anthropological, and Magical sign, with seven keys to its inner meaning” (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 99). Fourthly, she makes reference to various “modes of thought” on seven “planes of Ideality.” She reveals only three of these planes of thought, the “Realistic,” the “Idealistic,” and the “purely Divine or Spiritual.” The other planes of thought cannot be expressed in “ordinary phraseology” (1988b, vol. II, 335). The “modes of thought” are presented as “symbolical (archaic mode of thought), emblematical (a later though very ancient mode of thought), parabolical (allegory), hieroglyphical, or again *logogrammatical*” (1988b, vol. II, 335).

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<sup>65</sup> I have found few previous studies on the issue of the seven keys. James Santucci and Jerry Hejka-Ekins, in an explanatory footnote to a Blavatsky letter, summarily reference the seven keys as being, the physiological/anthropological (human), the astronomical, the symbolical, the theogonic, the metrological, the metaphysical, and the mystical (Blavatsky 2016, 57-58). An ‘Aryel Sanat’, in two internet articles, has located references to nineteen “keys” in H. P. Blavatsky’s works (2013; 2016).

Elsewhere, referencing the “truth” of a myth, she appears to mention two additional “planes of thought.” She writes that “we can give it only from its philosophical and intellectual planes, unlocked with three keys respectively” (1988b, vol. II, 517). The last four keys could not be revealed according to Blavatsky. Fifthly, she refers to various “modes of interpretation,” of which the Occult adepts have seven, while “the Jews” have only four. The four that Judaism retains are, the “real-mystical,” the “allegorical,” the “moral,” and the “literal or *Pashut*” (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 374). Finally, she refers to the “spirit of interpretation” of the Hindus and Egyptians, and the Hebrews. The spirit of interpretation of the Hindus and Egyptians is metaphysical and psychological, while that of the Hebrews is realistic and physiological (Blavatsky vol. II, 469). These six manoeuvres appear to be linked to the idea of interpretive keys and certainly they are linked to a process of interpretation. As they invoke a different vocabulary to that of just “keys” I note them separately.

Below I generate a table drawing together H. P. Blavatsky’s more explicit references to the “seven keys” in *The Secret Doctrine*. A table inevitably de-contextualises the elements it presents, and the reader should note that not every element presented is expressly called a “key” in every instance. However, the term “key” is, in these cases, used in the proximity of the statement and through inference I have understood them to be keys.<sup>66</sup>

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Physio-logical	Terre- strial/ Anthro- posophy	Psychic	Geo- metrical	Astro- nomical	Numerical	Astro- logical	Spiritual	Theo- gonical
I/363	I/363	I/363	I/311	I/311	I/311	II/23	I/363	I/363
	II/291		I/318	I/363	I/318	II/539		
			II/471	II/23	II/497			
				II/497				
				II/539				

Blavatsky does not seem consistent in her use of the term “key.” It is, of course, possible that the logic of her use eludes me, and that other collations could be proposed or, that there is no

<sup>66</sup> All references in the table are to *The Secret Doctrine*. “I” references volume one, and “II” references volume two.

underlying logic to be found. For example, referring to the “modes of interpretation” available to the “Jews” she mentions “real-mystical,” “allegorical,” “moral,” and “literal” and appears to call them “keys” (1988b, vol. I, 374). Elsewhere, allegory is referred to as a “mode of thought” (1988b, vol. II, 335). In another place she suggests that “allegory” and “symbol” are read or opened by the human or “terrestrial anthroposophy” key. It should also be noted that “analogy,” while mostly referred to as a “law,” is also referred to as a key in some instances (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 150, 604).

Obviously, the table lists nine keys, not the seven as anticipated. My proposal to resolve this discrepancy would be to regard column 1 and 2 as one key (Anthropological), and column 4 and 6 as one key (Geometrical, or Numerical), thus totalling seven keys (Blavatsky 1960, 180). Included in the Geometrical key would be her references to a “metrological key” (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 308; vol. II, 595). An interesting reference, in my opinion, is Blavatsky’s mention of “seven *sub-systems* and the key to the entire system” (1988b, vol. I, 311). My best present suggestion in resolving this is that the mysteries to be explained are both cosmic and human – the latter including that of the history of humanity. Each of these is resolved into seven divisions, that is seven cosmic planes, and seven human principles, implicit in the latter are the seven rounds and root-races. Each of these seven divisions is in turn divided into seven sub-divisions, making 49 mysteries to resolve, requiring 49 keys (Blavatsky 1982, 54). To read it in another way, there are seven keys, each key having seven subdivisions (sub-keys) depending on the object being unlocked. This would explain changes in terminology and application while a single key is being applied. For example, if one key deals with “physiology” this is with the human being as the object. It makes no literal sense to refer to the “physiology” of a solar system or planet, yet a key must be used to unlock the physical dimension of these entities. This might explain a sentence like, “science has only one key – the key of matter – to open the mysteries of the nature” (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 155). “Matter” might refer to the “physiology” of the human body and to its correspondences on earth - earthquakes, volcanoes, and leylines, etc. A “key” appears to mean something like an interpretive context.

To conclude this section, I ask myself, what is happening here? In broad strokes, ignoring specifics, H. P. Blavatsky is arguing that words, names, myths, and symbols can be read in more than one explanatory context and in more than one sense. For example, a particular deity in a myth may be read as referring to the blood in the human being and to the flow of energies in the earth and solar system. Referencing the “deluge” myth, as an example, she



suggests that a myth may have sidereal, geological, allegorical, and moral application (1988b, vol. II, 335). We can ask ourselves a number of questions and draw a number of conclusions at this point. We might ask: Can a religious text be read in this manner? I think the answer to this is, yes. Blavatsky has provided, for all its potential shortcomings, a way of understanding myth and religion, and Richard Rorty has argued that plausibility reflects a community decision as to what is allowable. We might ask: Can one find existing traditions in which this type of interpretive methodology has application? This is not to ask if this is a universal, cross-cultural, trans-historical method of interpretation, as Blavatsky claims. We are asking whether something resembling this method can be found in any existing religious tradition. I propose the answer is, yes. As a possible instance I would offer Jamgön Mipham's (1846-1912) commentary on the Seven-line Prayer to Guru Padmasambhava. This short prayer is read on several different interpretive levels which, in Theosophical vocabulary, might correspond to the anthropological, psychic, spiritual, literal, and historical keys. Finally, we might ask: Should one interpret religious texts in this manner? This is a little more difficult to answer and revolves around *how* texts are interpreted, and *why* texts are interpreted at all. How a text is interpreted has to do with the interpretive possibilities that lie within a culture. A whole culture turns towards interpretation but, as cultures are not homogeneous, there are a multitude of possible and viable interpretive perspectives. That some enterprises become forgotten or marginalised does not change this. The motivation for interpretation is not to be separated from the "use" of interpretation. Texts are interpreted in support of the larger narratives we are weaving about ourselves and for ourselves. They are harnessed in support of, and deployed to confirm, broader moves and trends in society.

#### 6.4) Additional Interpretive Strategies

I present, here, some practical examples of how H. P. Blavatsky's interpretive techniques lead to the disassociation, appropriation, and construction of meaning. While I attempt to separate these techniques out for clarity they are not necessarily as distinct in practice.

H. P. Blavatsky is conscious of the fact that she is adopting, transferring, and transforming the meaning of specific terms already in the public domain. She notes, "There are Sanskrit words used - "Jiva," for one - by *trans-Himalayan* adepts, whose meaning differs greatly in verbal applications, from the meaning it has among Brahmans in India" (1975, 347). It is not a question of Blavatsky being simply ignorant of inherited meanings. Her holistic reworking

and re-presentation of her underlying wisdom tradition brings about these shifts in meaning. She is also aware that her creative presentation and indiscriminate use of disparate terms—*Parabrahm* and God, for example—in her early writings has led to some of the criticisms aimed at her (1975, 51). Some of her later works are attempts to systematise and clarify her early presentations, which is a normal process of development in theory building.

Blavatsky is engaged in a conscious process of selection and rejection. Guided by the underlying pattern or typology she has found in religious texts, she selects and reweaves bits of information into her new synthesis. She notes, “In the Egyptian Papyri the whole Cosmogony of the Secret Doctrine is found scattered about in isolated sentences, even in the ‘Book of Dead’” (1988b, vol. I, 674). This is an inevitable result of her method which includes a selection of relevant facts picked according to a pre-existing model. We might recognize that this does not mean that her theory leaves an unexplained “remainder.” The parts she rejects are not unexplained; they are instead deliberately assessed as being of no importance.

As Theosophy has the complete, basic, and original pattern of truth, this allows her to fill the gaps she finds in existing traditions. Traditions which either lost the keys to the full understanding through corruption, or which in fact never contained the complete pattern, can now be spiritualised through Theosophical scrutiny. Deficient traditions are now amplified, augmented, and expanded to reflect the truth of the original pattern. An example of this is her addition of two *skandhas* to make an esoteric seven in total.

A further interpretive strategy is a re-reading in a modern vocabulary of various religious or mythic statements. Ancient myths of creation can be re-stated in contemporary philosophical or scientific language. For instance, while Egyptian texts might refer to *Atum* “copulating with himself” to generate the gods, Blavatsky writes of the process of creation in the following manner,

Manvantaric impulse commences with the re-awakening of Cosmic Ideation (the “Universal Mind”) concurrently with, and parallel to the primary emergence of Cosmic Substance – the latter being the manvantaric vehicle of the former – from its undifferentiated *pralayaic* state. Then, absolute wisdom mirrors itself in its Ideation; which, by a transcendental process, superior to and incomprehensible by human Consciousness, results in Cosmic Energy (*Fohat*). Thrilling through the bosom of

inert Substance, *Fohat* impels it to activity, and guides its primary differentiations on all the Seven planes of Cosmic Consciousness. (1988b, vol. I, 328)

Blavatsky has, however, also made what appears to be simple and irresolvable misreading of texts. These are readings which I do not believe can be explained by a semantic holism. An example of this is her apparent misreading of Herodotus on Menes in book II of his *The Histories*. Among other misunderstandings of the text, H. P. Blavatsky read Herodotus as listing the kings who preceded Menes, while Herodotus lists the kings who succeeded Menes (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 368-69; Herodotus 1996, 177-78). This is most likely a simple error in light of the fact that it is easy to reference and check. This misstatement has, however, been used to justify her position on a number of technical details in Theosophical thought.

## 7) CONCLUSION

I have stressed the coherence and internal consistency of the Theosophical presentation of H. P. Blavatsky. This is not a simple coherence argument for the rationality of her work. Her thoughts are rooted in the debates and issues of the nineteenth century. This is to argue, with Davidson, that coherence yields correspondence. I have highlighted the contested events of the séance room and spiritualism and the consequences that flow from them. Her work is also causally connected to the texts and traditions under interpretation.

I present Blavatsky's work as a creative and idiosyncratic, in a Rortyan sense, enterprise in interpretation. For Rorty, all novel theories could be regarded as idiosyncratic and, therefore, in this sense, Max Müller, Tylor, and other theorists could be seen as idiosyncratic. Certainly, in her own mind, she is reflecting the essence of religious texts, their real and intended, though hidden, meaning. From my perspective, however, she is involved in processes of extraction, creation, correction, and measuring. This measuring is carried out against the patterns she has noticed across religious texts. Blavatsky is not confined to repeating contemporary studies or to reflecting what is, perhaps, apparently plainly recorded in any specific text. Texts are read against her broader holistic understanding and as such she can justify her re-reading and re-ordering of statements.

These processes have led to negative assessments of H. P. Blavatsky's works and, as a practical illustration, we might briefly turn to Christopher A. Plaisance's critical review of

her use of the terms “soul” and “spirit” in *Isis Unveiled*.<sup>67</sup> In brief, Plaisance argues that Blavatsky has inverted the meanings historically associated with the Hermetic terms of “soul” and “spirit.” She has imposed a Pauline understanding of these terms onto a literature to which it does not belong. Plaisance’s assessment of Blavatsky is that she is guilty of plagiarism and “inventing,” is ignorant of the source material, is “dishonest” and “lazy,” displays “terminological inconsistency,” engages in “disingenuous appropriation,” and cannot be involved in “creative misreading” as only people who understand the source material can be said to do that (2013, 250-72).<sup>68</sup> This is a good story, though I suggest not the only one that might be told. Plaisance has read what H. P. Blavatsky has *said* but has missed what she is *doing* and, therefore, missed what she is really saying.

Plaisance has not appreciated the wholesale re-description of the field that H. P. Blavatsky is engaging in. She is developing, one could say “inventing,” a vocabulary which will allow her to cope with the material at hand. Blavatsky is not concerned with interpreting any one text or any single tradition. She is involved in an interpretive enterprise covering every religious text, myth, and tradition. Plaisance misses this when he reads “Hermetic” in *Isis Unveiled* as referencing mainstream understandings, for example, Alexandrian Hermeticism. The term Hermetic has, however, a unique place in Blavatsky’s larger narrative and Plaisance himself quotes *Isis Unveiled* to the effect that “Hermetic philosophy” is conceptually linked to the “ancient universal Wisdom-religion” (2013, 251). We are, then, no longer referencing Alexandrian traditions in any usual sense. The meaning shifts that Plaisance abhors, I suggest, are largely explainable by the corrective and holistic vision that Blavatsky is developing. Linked to this is Blavatsky’s clear intention to uncover the “esoteric” and real meaning of ancient texts. Her semantic holism allows for the invention of terms, a vocabulary, and for a corrective reading of individual instances. She is also clearly conscious of what she is doing. She references the spirit/soul as problematic in ancient usage, its link to Paul, and the need to “invent” terms to describe her ideas (Blavatsky 1977, 292, 331-6; n.d., 14-5).

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<sup>67</sup> In response to Plaisance’s more recent article “Occult Spheres, Planes, and Dimensions: Geometric Terminology and Analogy in Modern Esoteric Discourse,” (2016) in addition to the points I raise here, I would include the following comments: he makes undefined use of the term “esoteric;” he does not acknowledge his own personal selections and the influence this has for his broader points; his work is insufficiently synchronically contextualised when referencing the late nineteenth century; and he has not embraced the consequences of Rorty’s broad critique of all epistemological claims.

<sup>68</sup> I feel Plaisance is on thin ice when he trades on the binaries of reading/misreading and understanding/misunderstanding. Plaisance will claim to have correctly “read” and “understood” the texts at hand but, we ask, can this claim be *justified* in a non-circular way (Culler 1994, 175-9)?

Is she a poor scholar of historical Hermetic traditions? It is difficult to answer this because she does not present herself as an exclusive scholar of Hermeticism. A Theosophically oriented scholar of Hermeticism and Gnosticism was G. R. S. Mead, who, conveniently, has written on these same issues. He seemingly had no real problem discussing, for example, the term *augoeidēs* as found in Hermetic and Platonic works (1967, 56-81). Could Plaisance apply the same list of pejoratives he aimed at Blavatsky to Mead? I do not believe so. The point I feel to be stressed here is that H. P. Blavatsky is involved in a “revolutionary” re-description of a broad field of knowledge. Her works must be understood within this larger context and movement. Through this, I believe, a better understanding of what she was doing and saying will be gained. Plaisance, to his credit, managed to refrain from calling Blavatsky irrational. This normative evaluation is, however, the inevitable outcome of arguments like his, which do not adequately describe all the issues and forces at play. I work to present Blavatsky as a rational, reasoned, and engaged scholar who attempted a large scale re-reading of the late nineteenth century. That her presentation failed to attain prominence is true, but rejection was the ultimate fate of much nineteenth-century theory. As Rorty outlined, arguments are not won or lost with an obvious victor declared. Instead, a society or community gradually abandons an old, familiar, less useful vocabulary and adopts a new, more useful one. With the new vocabulary and habits come fresh problems and debates, while the old debates associated with the past are forgotten and erased.

Before I move to my final chapter, wherein I will locate H. P. Blavatsky’s statements on mainstream interpretive endeavours of religion in the late nineteenth century, I make a quick point. We might ask ourselves, has Blavatsky produced a reliable interpretation of religion as a category and of individual religions? Are her interpretive statements true to the texts she is exploring? For example, when she equates *Atum* with the Theosophical *Fohat*, is she being true to the Egyptian conception? This is one mode of questioning. A different mode, the approach I am endorsing here, considers whether Blavatsky was justified in her perspective. To support this position I refer to Rorty’s distinction between causing beliefs and justifying beliefs (Davidson 1989, 311; Rorty 1991, 83-4, 97; Tartaglia 2007, 212-6, 219-20). The religions and religious texts of the world may *cause* belief, that is, may cause one to have an interpretive stance, but they do not justify it. This is to argue that texts do not intentionally present themselves to the reader in such a way that they cannot but be correctly understood – as Rorty phrases it, they do not insist “on being *described in a certain way, its own way* (1991, 83). As one surveys the domain of religion/s one adopts an interpretive stance, one of

many descriptive possibilities. Thus, we have various interpretive positions, including, as nineteenth-century instances, Max Müller's and E. B. Tylor's models. What makes an interpretive school relevant is not that it "got" Ancient Egypt, or the Egyptian religion "right." It is impossible that we will ever really recapture what exactly Ancient Egyptians or early Indian religions specifically thought about the world in every instance. It is important to remember that justification of one's beliefs comes not from any representational link to the world or religious texts directly. Justification is a function of relations to other beliefs and interpretations that we already hold. The late nineteenth century was a broad field of inquiry including multiple and competing stances on individual issues. Justification is a result of the larger webs of meaning we locate ourselves in, and H. P. Blavatsky's understanding of religion is warranted once her larger interpretive world is located.

I have worked to show that H. P. Blavatsky engaged with religion and produced an interpretive stance which is justified, rational, and historically comprehensible. In my final chapter I examine her statements concerning other movements in interpreting religion. This will involve recapturing her position in relation to the emerging "science of religion" and the field of comparative theology. Linked to this endeavour, I will draw out her statements in relation to a selection of actors in the field of comparative religious studies, including, F. Max Müller, E. B. Tylor, and Herbert Spencer. This contextualising will allow for a more charitable grasp of her overall stance on interpreting religion than is usually proffered.

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### 1) INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I move away from a strict chronological assessment of H. P. Blavatsky's statements and focus instead on her general comparative enterprise and the ways in which it intersects with selected themes and actors in the broader field. I propose to move centrifugally from her works by examining specific textual engagements with a *representative selection* of students of religion. Where she references an important figure under review, for example, F. Max Müller or E. B. Tylor, I will discuss her perspective on the referenced aspect of their work and bring to light some of the underlying assumptions and tensions. Given space constraints it is not possible to conduct a whole-scale comparison of her work against all individual competitors (or colleagues), though I may touch on basic underlying assumptions. I hope my focus on specific intersectional instances will highlight the *use* she made of the sources available in the nascent field of comparative religion. The late nineteenth century can be seen as a matrix, a womb, which gave birth to a variety of theories of religion. All theorists of religion, then, had the same parent, the fullness of the nineteenth century and its resources, and what binds them together is more potent than what appears to separate them. I am arguing that valorising one project over another says as much about our own choices and assumptions as it does about the quality of H. P. Blavatsky's works. I am focused on her enterprise as a holistic, self-sustaining, and justifiable interpretive theory of religion and religions in the late nineteenth century.

### 2) BROAD BACKGROUND TO COMPARATIVE RELIGION IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The general background of events and currents which contributed to the establishment of a professional era in comparative religion is broadly acknowledged. I only point to them, as they are of no direct importance to my argument. H. P. Blavatsky fell within the ambit of the late nineteenth century and she would have inevitably been influenced and open – or closed – to its various movements, moments, tendencies, resources, and inherited histories, as would all of the nineteenth-century characters implicated. It is apparent, however, that the various

participants had differing foundational assumptions and manipulated the available resources in distinctive ways. This is revealed by the disputes and disagreements between, as specific instances, Andrew Lang and F. Max Müller, between F. Max Müller and William D. Whitney, and between Herbert Spencer and Frederic Harrison.<sup>69</sup>

One background condition to the development of a global comparative religion was the increase in available materials. As often noted, the nineteenth century saw an increase in the availability of new religious texts, especially Asian writings, new archaeological material, and, due to the imperialistic impulse, more ethnological data on diverse groups of people (Vries 1977; Sharpe 1986). However, while there was a proliferation of resources in the nineteenth century, we can note the same claims made for the eighteenth century (Manuel 1967, 6-7). We could make a similar claim for the twentieth century. Did we really have a clear understanding of, for example, Tibetan Buddhism, until the 1950s exodus from Tibet? Did we have a comprehensive grasp of all Tibetan Buddhist perspectives on *nirvana*, a nineteenth-century topic of interest, until the 1980s with the discovery of the Jonang texts? One might mention the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, *Nag Hammadi Texts*, and other discoveries. It may, instead, make sense to speak of a broadening and intensification of existing trends, rather than of something new happening. While new material may initiate new theories and insights into cultures and religions, this is to be seen as an historical process continually unfolding over time. New materials may also confirm existing theories instead of breaking with the past, there is no rule here. Herbert Spencer is an example of this. Sharpe's rough assessment of Herbert Spencer's theory of religion is that it displayed the qualities of Euhemerism, and his real importance to the field is not his specific theory but rather his emphasis on the importance of evolution to the field (1986, 32-34). Euhemerism is not a novel theory of religion by any stretch of the imagination. Referencing the implications of new resources we might review Egypt as an instance, relevant due to the so-called "Egyptian" atmosphere of Blavatsky's earlier writings.

Prior to Champollion's deciphering of hieroglyphics in the 1820s there were rich theories and interpretations of Egyptian religion. However, many of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century views were seemingly undone by the possibility of actually reading Egyptian texts.

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<sup>69</sup> The disputes between Andrew Lang and F. Max Müller are well-known. An overview of the dispute between F. Max Müller and Whitney can be reviewed in Whitney's *Max Müller and the Science of Language: a Criticism* (1892). That between Spencer and Harrison is gathered in Youmans *The Nature and Reality of Religion: a Controversy between Frederic Harrison and Herbert Spencer* (1885). H. P. Blavatsky was aware of some of these disputes, and others of the nineteenth century, now mostly forgotten (1988a, vol. II, 47, 472).



This was not, though, the end of the development of Egyptology. Ancient Egypt was not suddenly “understood” in the 1830s, and it is not simply “understood” now. Current Egyptological views on the constitution of the individual – the *ba*, *ka*, *khat*, etc. – appear to be rooted in a theory of animism which has been challenged in the field of comparative religion (Zabkar 1968; Bolshakov 1997; Chidester 2005). New materials may initiate new debates, new questions, revisions of the past, and new competing theories, though they may also simply reinforce existing positions. Two particular developments in Egyptology are of relevance to Blavatsky’s position, both of which revolve around timing.

The first is the superseding in importance of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* by the *Pyramid Texts*. These latter writings were only discovered and made available in French in the 1880s (Hornung 1999, xvii, 2). Blavatsky’s textual interest is primarily concerned with the once named “Bible of the Egyptians,” the *Book of the Dead*. How else could it be when the *Pyramid* and *Coffin Texts* attained prominence after her major writings and death? This is important because the *Book of the Dead* shows a sophistication and development of thought not usually associated with the beginning of a tradition. Prior to the discovery of the *Pyramid* and *Coffin Texts* it was regarded as the oldest Egyptian text, which meant that the oldest text was the most theologically developed. This anomaly challenged evolutionary narratives of the time. We know now that that the *Book of the Dead* is a much later compilation, with sections drawn from the earlier writings, reversing the narrative and chronology which held sway over Blavatsky.

The second example relates to the “discovering” of Pre-Dynastic Egypt. The Egyptologist Walter Emery noted, “Before 1895, our knowledge of Egypt’s history did not extend back beyond the reign of the Pharaoh Senefru, first king of the Fourth Dynasty” (1961, 21). David Gange has contextualised and broadened our understanding of the situation. He begins by noting that Egyptology professionalised in the last 30 years of the nineteenth century; we have seen the same claim made for any number of fields during this period, including that of comparative religion. This involved, among other things, the development of new methodologies and techniques. William Matthew Flinders Petrie was one of the founders of professional Egyptology and Archaeology and is responsible for developing a typological sequence dating system. Flinders Petrie, as Gange has pointed out, went to Egypt with the express purpose of fitting Egyptological finds into a biblical chronology. Ancient Egypt was seen as possibly providing the evidence to support various biblical claims against the challenge of evolution and sciences such as geology. Gange continues,

These sciences [evolutionary and geological] claimed that man's intellectual capacity had undergone a constant development from primitive origins, and in the late nineteenth century, when the earth was thought to be many times younger than we now know it to be, the timescale for this process was drastically foreshortened. The argument employed by the vast majority of those who took an interest in ancient Egypt during this period was that this civilization – the oldest to have left some substantial documentation behind – could settle the issue of origins. To some, Egyptian civilization was seen to betray remnants of man's bestial state, revealing him coming down from the trees to begin the course of civilization. To others, including the biblical Egyptologists, Egypt revealed man reeling in the wake of the biblical fall, within memory of a glorious, more enlightened stage of civilization. The fact that predynastic artefacts only began to be appreciated for what they were in the late 1890s was of great significance here: before this it was widely noted that Egyptian civilization seemed to have come into existence as a fully formed complex culture, a major blow, it was felt, to evolution.

Part of the claim made by supporters of evolution and biblical criticism was that in the age of the Old Testament, when humanity was in a stage of evolution significantly less advanced than that of Victorian Britain, written language must have been relatively undeveloped, that the Pentateuch must therefore be an unreliable – even barbaric – document based on centuries of distorting oral tradition before its eventual materialization in written form. Egyptologists therefore went to Egypt not just to find records of biblical events, but in search of the highly developed written culture that they were certain must exist, and that would offer a serious setback to the claims of evolutionists and biblical critics. Some Egyptologists even went so far as to resurrect the enlightenment idea – well-known from Newton's writings – that all of the world's civilizations sprang from a single source in a glorious super-civilization that had known divine knowledge but in its decadence had been destroyed by the Noachic deluge. The British Museum Egyptologist Peter le Page Renouf for instance, supported this idea in his Hibbert Lectures of 1878, writing:

It is incontestable true that the sublimer portions of the Egyptian religion are not the comparatively late result of a process of development or elimination from the grosser. The sublime portions are demonstrably ancient; and the last stage of the Egyptian religion, that known to the Greek and Latin writers, heathen or Christian, was by far the grossest and the most corrupt.(in Gange 2006, 1089-90)

I have quoted this passage at some length as it reveals a number of points relevant to my larger thesis. We see that Predynastic Egypt was revealed through a series of archaeological finds and new techniques in the mid to late 1890s. This is after the publication of H. P. Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) or even her passing away in 1891. The paucity of data would have allowed for greater speculation by all participants. Additionally, the field of Egyptology was in the process of disciplining during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. During this period of contestation the existing evidence could support any number of positions, including some which were reflected in Theosophical positions. The point, from my perspective, is that the evidence was capable of being narrativised in various ways. Blavatsky could, therefore, draw on reliable third party resources in support of her position. The late nineteenth century, in its totality, was a pool of resources from which actors could draw on in support of their theories. Some emphasised certain positions, while others emphasised and privileged other stances. Such is the *modus operandi* of rational and considered theorising.

These are examples presented to make a point. A great deal more study is required of Blavatsky's works and the manner in which they intersect with every discipline of the nineteenth century. The lack of such studies can mislead even superb scholars such as Joscelyn Godwin, referencing Andrew Dickson White's *The Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896), into making statements like,

White's work does half the job of *Isis Unveiled*: the exoteric half of demolishing religious superstition, obscurantism, and persecution in the clear light of science. What its rationalist author could not possibly imagine was the esoteric half of Blavatsky's work, which in turn demolishes the pretensions of science by adducing a mass of evidence against the premises of materialism. (1994, 305)

Firstly, "science" is not one "thing;" it is a diverse body of fields comprising many competing strands, some of which H. P. Blavatsky endorsed. Secondly, why is it Blavatsky's "esoteric" criticism that attacks materialism? Many sciences were internally divided amongst themselves on the precise value of materialism and Blavatsky drew on these internal disputes to create, reinforce, and develop her position.

In the late nineteenth century we might additionally point to interrelated events and trends in both the centre of European society and at the periphery of European power, which influenced the development of comparative religion as an enterprise. At the periphery,

colonial and imperial endeavours led to increasing cultural contact with non-European traditions and an attendant proliferation of material. David Chidester, focusing on Southern Africa as a case study, has provided a model of how the science of comparative religion at the imperial centre was founded, at least in part, on materials drawn from the colonial periphery that were worked into an evolutionary narrative involving savages, primitives, and a civilized Europe. Focusing on the production, authentication, and circulation of material via a complex triple network of imperial theorists, colonial interrogators, and indigenous informants, Chidester has worked to show how the history of the comparative project is to be complicated. The supposed “raw materials” invoked by the founders of comparative religion in Europe have been shown to be mediated by earlier actors. Having erased the complex origins of their material these founding theorists reworked the material with methodologies and theories popular in Europe (Chidester 1996; 2014). Whatever repercussions this had for the major theorists, Blavatsky would be implicated too.

Internal to European culture, though not separate from peripheral events, were various philosophies, trends, and developments contributing to the forms taken by comparative religion. The Enlightenment rationalism of the eighteenth century, specifically the Deist legacy, has been singled out as an important foundation of nineteenth-century comparative religion (Byrne 1991). The counter-Enlightenment and Romantic and Idealistic impulses provided a reaction to the eighteenth-century focus on rationalism. The Romantic impulse emphasised the historical unfolding of religion and promoted the affective over the cognitive foundation of religion (Vries 1977, 39-58; Byrne 1991, 181). Reviewing the general characteristics of the Enlightenment and Romantic movements I do not think Blavatsky fits neatly into either movement and appears to draw from both trends (Tarnas 1999, 366-78).<sup>70</sup> If she can refer to Arnold’s *Light of Asia* as being “replete with philosophical thought and religious feeling – just the book, in short, we needed in our period of *Science of Religion* – and the general toppling of ancient gods,” I would suggest that Theosophical thought preferences the philosophical over the emotional aspect of religion (Blavatsky n.d., 131). Ivan Strenski has emphasised the influence of Biblical Criticism for the development of comparative religion. Techniques and methodologies initially evolved to critically assess the Bible, including philology, hermeneutics, historical contextualising, and text-criticism, were applied to other religions as their texts and historical environment became open to scrutiny in

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<sup>70</sup>H. P. Blavatsky would not be the first student of religion to be seen to defy classification into one or other of these trends. See Blok on G. F. Creuzer (Blok 1994, 28).

Europe (Preuss 1987; Strenski 2006). Scientific developments inevitably had repercussions on any European assessment of the world, including comparative religion. The central importance of an evolutionary narrative was, as an instance, the grounding principle of much comparative theory. De Vries highlights the influence of Comtean Positivism with, among other aspects, its interest in uncovering “laws” which governed nature (Vries 1977, 62-3).<sup>71</sup> If de Vries can refer to the “establishment of laws” as a goal of Positivist investigation I would suggest that H. P. Blavatsky, with her own uncovering of “Occult Laws,” displayed a similar interest in her work.

If the above is the familiar background to the development of the study of religion, Jason Ānanda Josephson (also Jason Ānanda Josephson-Storm) has proposed a new history, initially in a journal article, “God’s Shadow: Occluded Possibilities in the Genealogy of ““Religion”” (2013) and more recently in his book *The Myth of Disenchantment* (2017). The book is an elaboration of his article and his broad project is more clearly presented in it. Josephson-Storm concern is to challenge what he calls the “Myth of Disenchantment” which is linked to the “Myth of Modernity” and, consequently, to the “Myth of a Postmodern” turn. If disenchantment never fully occurred, then the assumptions of Modernity are a “Myth” and, according to him, the disenchantment narrative itself is simply another myth. I am sympathetic to this work, but will focus my comments on Josephson-Storm’s assessment of Blavatsky. Josephson-Storm, recognising the importance of spiritualism in the nineteenth century, argues that the “disciplinary formation of religious studies has been misread.” The “cultural setting” for religious studies was not “antireligious skepticism,” “mainstream Protestantism,” “secular disenchantment” or “liberal theology.” Instead, spiritualists, occultists, and scholars of religion were “fellow travellers,” and “inhabitants of the same conceptual universe” (2013, 337; 2017, 122). The discipline, Josephson argues, emerged from a Counter-Enlightenment trajectory in communication with Western esoteric impulses. The French Enlightenment produced a binary system of classification which included the study of “spirits” (a “science of spirits”) as the negative half and the study of natural and revealed theology (comparative theology) as the positive half (2013, 312). The Enlightenment project is then “haunted” by the very things it classifies and attempts to devalue. For Josephson, it is no coincidence that the study of religion arose in the same context as spiritualism and Theosophy, and the enterprise defined itself against these

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<sup>71</sup>For a brief overview of Comte’s influence on comparative religion see William Grassie, *The New Sciences of Religion* (2010, 31-47). For H. P. Blavatsky’s dismissal of Auguste Comte and Positivism, rooted in her positive evaluation of spiritualistic phenomena, see *Isis Unveiled* (1988a, vol. I, 75-84).

emergent movements. He then discusses three actors, F. Max Müller, Eliphas Levi, E. B. Tylor, and H. P. Blavatsky focusing on their shared background commitments.

The broad nineteenth-century background that Josephson-Storm presents is that of an opposition between science and religion which, linked to concerns over the place of God and humanity in the world, led to both to the rise of various occult movements and to the emergence of disciplined study of religion. The opposition between science and religion led to two supplementary categories which exist, in part, as critiques of secularizing and modernizing forces. The categories are a positive conception of “magic” and a negative construction of “superstition”. Referring to Theosophy and spiritualism Josephson writes, “These movements embodied dissatisfaction with the perceived consequences of the Enlightenment while benefiting from many of its basic assumptions. They attempted to occupy the position of “science” and to assert the universality of their particular interpretive systems, at the same moment that they strove to subvert the symbols of the established order” (2013, 314).

A number of issues emerge from Josephson-Storm’s narrative as it relates to Theosophy. The first is Josephson’s hasty linking of spiritualism, Theosophy, the Golden Dawn, and Spiritism. While there could always be ever broader categories or themes under which disparate groups could be linked, a closer look would show defining individualities and differences that are glossed over. Secondly, he subtly carries forward distinctions between the Theosophical project and the nascent field of comparative religion, the retaining of which I question. For example, he remarks that academics spent their time in European libraries critically translating texts while Theosophists went east in search of “revelation.” Theosophists were, however, also engaged in the translation of texts, specifically Asian texts, and made use of the new translations of religious literature. To call Theosophy “quasi-academic”, as he does, is to iterate loaded distinctions of the past and present which, in fact, require direct challenging. The interesting distinction between Theosophists and academics was in term of interpretive orientation relating to metaphysical commitments concerning contemporary events, not in methodology.

Furthermore, we need to consider the question of chronology and direction of influence. Theosophy, surely, drew some of its initial impulse from the internal scientific debates and contestations. Subverting the “symbols of the established order,” assuming there was such an order, surely began *within* the scientific community, before Blavatsky adopted them in

support of her enterprise. Josephson further remarks that the movements mentioned provided a “necrovitalist critique” of the Enlightenment. But, I wonder, do we really want to say that is what A. R. Wallace was doing? Why wasn’t he just being an honest scientist following the evidence where it led him? In the same light, why isn’t H. P. Blavatsky simply a student of comparative religion? Why is the Theosophical effort characterised as a “doppelganger” or as being “esoteric”? This vocabulary is better dropped. Theosophy, I confine myself to this movement, is not separate from the various knowledge fields of the nineteenth century, which themselves were not homogenous entities. The potential for communicating with disembodied intelligences lay within the parameters of science and was not confined to the spiritualist or esoteric milieu. Josephson-Storm’s tone is in part anachronistic and insufficiently historical. The evocative neologisms, furthermore, function to distance and separate certain thoughts and ideas from those seemingly closer and more acceptable to him. The rehabilitation I am aiming for requires a direct revisionist critique of positions of the past. In part, differences between Josephson-Storm and my efforts are a function of our choices over story space and entry point. Josephson-Storm is challenging a diachronic narrative of disenchantment. I have entered the debates through a synchronic based re-description of the scientific assessment of the séance and related phenomena, and the implications which flow from this re-conceptualisation.

In the vision of the field of the study of religion that I am trying to outline, Blavatsky, Max Müller, Tylor, and any other contemporary actor should be seen as occupying equal though different places in the history of the field. They all drew on the available resources in unique ways and presented theories of religion. Any hierarchical valuing of the different endeavours is not supported by any interesting criteria and represents another uncritical casting of the present, the inheritor of past distinctions, into the past. It is also an error to reject any potential influence in the production of a theory. Once one goes into individual biography the problems of broad contextualising become even more apparent. I look now, however, to discuss some of the issues raised by the notion of the “professionalising” of the field of comparative religion.

### 3) PROFESSIONALISING THE FIELD

We are examining the field of comparative religion and H. P. Blavatsky's potential place in it. If, in or around the 1870s, comparative religion became a science, professionalised, or disciplined itself we need to examine the import and consequences of this boundary-marking. As Blavatsky's works were contemporaneous with the founding of the field, and despite the fact that she had a clear interest in understanding religion, her exclusion from its histories is of some interest. I will highlight a number of the boundaries and distinctions drawn and review them in the light of her enterprise and my own broader methodological and philosophical grounding. It is, of course, my position that the existence of Blavatsky's comparative enterprise destabilises the assumptions on which the field has been constructed, and that the use of the "professionalising" metaphor is at an end.

I have earlier reflected the idea that "professionalizing," "disciplining," or "institutionalising" a field is primarily the establishing of academic chairs, re-directing of resources to specific endeavours, the self-perpetuating of favoured assumptions, methodologies and theories, and the fulltime employment of scholars. What "professionalizing" does not entail is a specific body of knowledge or practice true across time. What professionals do and the manner in which they conduct their research will differ synchronically and diachronically. As an example, we might review Sharpe with his perspective on the founding of the field of comparative religion. Pinning the beginning to the 1860s and 1870s he proposes there should be a motive, available material, an acceptable methodology, and the detachment of the researchers (1986, 1-2). He further goes on to describe the "study of religion" as scientific (inductive), critical (based on evidence), historical, and comparative (the basis of knowledge) (1986, 31). An additional indicator of professionalism was the establishment of university chairs in various countries around this period. If these were the necessary foundations of a professional comparative enterprise, then one may wonder if the field still exists. I refer to the isolating of inductive thinking. It is also fairly apparent to me that the early professionals within the field did not live up to all these ideals themselves in all instances. Note Louis Henry Jordan's comments as they relate to "detachment." Writing of the new field he comments, "Its function consists in placing the numerous Religions of the world side by side, in order that, deliberately comparing and contrasting them, it may frame a reliable estimate of their respective claims and values" (1905, xi). Discussing whether Christianity may be more "worthy" than any other religion he continues, quite incredibly by modern standards, to say, "If, however, an opposite verdict should be necessitated by a summation of all the available



evidence, Comparative Religion will never hesitate to discharge its full duty in the circumstances. The demands of truth are paramount, and they must at all costs be respected” (1905, xii). Corrective and correcting, that was my earlier assessment of H. P. Blavatsky’s enterprise. For Jordan, evidently, scientific comparative religion was in a place to judge the worthiness of individual religions. In many respects Blavatsky’s writings sit comfortably within such operative parameters and once Jordan begins to outline his normative vision of the “Science of Comparative Religion,” his definition of “Science” in this context, and his definition of “Comparative Religion,” I think traditional historians of the field may well throw their hands up in despair (1905, 13-5, 63). I can think of no interesting or compelling reasons, historical, intellectual, or methodological to exclude H. P. Blavatsky’s enterprise in comparative religion from the history of the field.<sup>72</sup>

I wish to make my point clear. A benign definition of “professionalising,” that is, any definition shorn of all knowledge content, is simply uninteresting. If the simple establishment of a university chair in a particular subject is sufficient to call that field “professional,” then this is of no real importance. What is of interest are the actual theories produced. I have no doubt that individuals employed fulltime to produce theories of religion may be more successful than part-time scholars, but this status simply increases the odds of success, it is not defining of where relevance lies. We could also note that professionalising may lead to normative and exclusionary commitments or, as Byrne notes, that ontological foundations underlie any theory of religion (Byrne 1991, 204, 243). This is an obvious insight into much academic research. My specific point is that in the late nineteenth century who was in and who was out was as much based on a party line being followed as it was on any justifiable argument. An example of this might be Sir John Lubbock, who is mentioned in various histories of the field of comparative religion but, who was not university educated let alone professionally employed by one (Sharpe 1986, 52). Lubbock toed the evolutionary and naturalistic line which was favoured by a growing section of the educated population, and he is included in the history of the field. Blavatsky, who did not tow the mainstream line, is out. This is not even to mention other extra-scientific factors that result in exclusions. Such as the subtle paternalism which appears in Max Müller’s assessment of Blavatsky, leading him to

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<sup>72</sup>We may feel that the current field of comparative religion has moved on from many of these early concerns. However, it seems many of these issues reappear in a new guise. Boundary disputes, the negotiating of who was, is, or should be regarded as a participant in the field, continue. See Ivan Strenski on David Chidester, as an example (Chidester 1996, xxi; Strenski 2004). A further example might be the reappearance of Comparative Theology within the study of religion discipline. (See Locklin and Nicholson, 2010).

imply she was temperamentally unfit to study religion dispassionately (Müller 1901, 101). We could also note Max Müller's appeal that only individuals competent in *Sanskrit* and *Pāli* should be allowed to comment on Asian (Buddhist) scriptures (Müller 1901, 107). This is his complaint against both H. P. Blavatsky and Andrew Lang. Yet, Andrew Lang is in the histories of the field.<sup>73</sup> These exclusionary actions are not confined to the nineteenth-century actors, we perpetuate them.

We might reflect on a number of binaries: science/pseudo-science; professional/amateur; secular/theological; naturalism/supernaturalism; etic/emic. Many of these are already questioned. For example, Masuzawa challenges the value of the both the professional/amateur (lay) and the comparative religion/comparative theology divisions in the history of the field (Masuzawa 2005, 74, 104). The others have been challenged by both narrative theory and semantic holism (Flood 1999; Gardiner and Engler 2012; 239-55). My broad stance is that these binaries are intrinsically uninteresting. My specific argument is that they were not sufficiently entrenched in the late nineteenth century to be of interpretive use and that they cannot, therefore, be invoked as exclusionary mechanisms to be applied to Blavatsky. Which actors are to be included or excluded from the history of comparative religion? This is not a sterile question of the past. I refer again to Ivan Strenski's criticisms of David Chidester's inclusion of various actors in the "science" of comparative religion (2004). Strenski is surely right that a science must have its scientists. And Chidester is surely right to include the intermediary and indigenous participants that he does, thereby problematising and re-defining the accepted boundaries of the "science." The shortcoming of Strenski is to link comparative religion exclusively to academic chairs. This just cannot stand historically, and should not stand intellectually.

#### 4) H. P. BLAVATSKY ON COMPARING

If we accept that the discipline of comparative religion began professionalising in the 1870s, we might ask, where does H. P. Blavatsky situate her work in relation to this newly self-conscious movement? A number of things stand out to me. We can see that Blavatsky embraces a "comparative" method and that she is impressed by the prestige of "science."

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<sup>73</sup>H. P. Blavatsky was proficient in at least French, Russian, and English, sufficient for our contemporary academic requirements. Furthermore, full proficiency in the languages of every world scripture eluded Max Müller, as I have no doubt it eludes most scholars of comparative religion today. It is obvious also that Max Müller's proficiency in language did not insulate him from a methodological bias or associated shortcomings.

None of this is unexpected if we recall Daston and Galison's epistemic codes at play in the nineteenth century. In terms of the disciplinary field, Blavatsky makes specific reference to the "science of religion," "comparative religion," "comparative theology," "comparative philology," and "comparative mythology."<sup>74</sup> She identifies many of these fields as "sciences," though she has an ambivalent assessment of them. Her further references to the comparative endeavours of the nineteenth century highlight the widespread use of the comparative technique during that period. Thus, Blavatsky can refer to a "comparative method," "comparative anatomy," "comparative symbology," "comparative grammar," "comparative vocabularies," "comparative psychology," "comparative occult symbology," "comparative theogony," "comparative pathology," and can further refer to various works of the time which included "comparative religion" or "science of religion" in the title.

To appreciate Blavatsky's position we need to take a step back and recall her own narrative. Essentially, she presents herself as an inheritor of a wisdom tradition that has secretly carried the truths concerning nature and humanity in the religions, myths, and traditions of the world. This esoteric tradition, into which she has been initiated, is now to be uncovered in the various religions of the world through her activities. The comparison and justification she engages in through her writings is in support of this pre-existing body of "occult" truths, and these literary activities are secondary to the living transmission of which she is a link. This is her story, though, as I have argued, it cannot be mine or any other scholar's in the current academic climate. This is not to say that her story is necessarily untrue, rather it is to accept that her perspective is not currently justified and is less useful than recent theories of religion. We must either accept her story as true, or we must give an alternate explanation for the origin of her theory of religion. Currently, we cannot accept her story as true, therefore, as an alternate stance I have proposed that her work is the result of her research and study of religious material and of her engagement with the intellectual world of the late nineteenth

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<sup>74</sup>If by comparative theology one means the comparing of religions from a Christian foundation then H. P. Blavatsky had no overt link to this and is usually presented as "anti-Christian." If, instead, one sees comparative theology as the comparing and juxtaposing of the theological and doctrinal systems of various traditions, then this is fair description of what Blavatsky is doing. See Hugh Nicholson *The New Comparative Theology and the Problem of Theological Hegemonism* for a brief note on the difference between comparative theology and comparative religion in the late nineteenth century (2010, 49). No doubt one may find underlying Biblical themes in Blavatsky's orientation if one searches for them, but if the case this would really be par for the course in a certain sense (Boag 2011). For example, criticising "false analogies" in the field, F. Max Müller proposed the following categories to be used as foci for comparison, "the belief in a divine power, the acknowledgement of sin, the habit of prayer, the desire to offer sacrifice, and the hope of a future life" (Max Müller 1895a, 100-1).

century as a whole. She is, therefore, no different from any other actor in the field in the late nineteenth century, and my shift is from what she is saying to what she is doing. It is simply the fact that we cannot allow her to be different, as to do so would undermine the intellectual assumptions of our own age. For Blavatsky, one first knows the truth, then, one locates this truth in the material and resources of the world. Scholarly research theoretically moves in the opposite direction though it has become clear that “objective” research is illusory, scholars and methodologies have implicit ontological assumptions, and the by rote application of a theoretical model will result in pre-determined outcomes.

I turn now to her actual statements. Referring to comparative religion she believes that this enterprise will, with philology, eventually concede the common root of all religions. Preventing this is the lack of knowledge of the “symbolical universal language” with its various keys (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 317-8). Confirming my argument that for H. P. Blavatsky science is a body of truths about the world and humanity, and not a specific method, she notes, “the study of comparative religion” cannot “become a ‘Science’ until the symbols of every Religion yield their final secrets” (Blavatsky 1985, 444). Comparative Theology and philology have had “meagre” results due to the lack of the esoteric keys and to the fact that scholars have struggled to decode the “allegorical speech” of the past (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. I, 269). She believes that various ancient texts present the same secret doctrine under an allegorical guise. On the one hand, the “exact sciences” of philology and comparative mythology prove Theosophical points and, on the other, they are regarded as limited tools (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. I, 580; Blavatsky 1975, 66). Referencing the comparative method in general, Blavatsky notes, “To thoroughly comprehend the idea underlying every ancient cosmology necessitates the study, in a comparative analysis, of all the great religions of antiquity; as it is only by this method that the root idea will be made plain” (1988b, vol. I, 424). In the *Key to Theosophy*, when asked how Theosophy will reconcile religions and sects, she answers “[by] their comparative study and analysis” (Blavatsky 1987b, 3-4). Illustrating her dual movement mentioned above, when asked how Theosophy could reveal the truths in religion, myths, and traditions, she indicated that the first step is by presenting the occult truths of the mystery schools, and the second would be by use of the “comparative method” (Blavatsky 1960, 404).

H. P. Blavatsky endorses the various unfolding scientific fields when they support her stance, for example, when they undermine the uniqueness of Christianity, highlight the rationality of

past religions, appear to be moving in her direction, or they actually propose a position which she too holds. She will find them wanting when they fall short of her position.

Blavatsky references a bewildering array of resources. To which of these sources she owes the greatest debt, or any debt, is difficult to establish and this is quite possibly the wrong question to ask. Sheer quantity of reference is no sure sign of influence. Sources which discuss or list the potential references of H. P. Blavatsky include:

Gomes' *Theosophy in the Nineteenth Century* (1994),

Gomes' *A Catalogue of Books Belonging to H. P. Blavatsky* (1995),

Coleman's *The Sources of Madame Blavatsky's Writing* (1895),

Each volume of the *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings* contains a "General

Bibliography with Selected Biographical Notes" on various reference sources,

The Pasadena edition of *Isis Unveiled* (1988a) contains a "Bibliographical Index with an Author and Title Key,"

The Theosophical Publishing House edition of *Isis Unveiled* (1972) contains a more detailed version of the Pasadena edition Bibliography,

The Theosophical Publishing House edition of *The Secret Doctrine* has a third volume entitled "General Index and Bibliography" (1987a),

The Pasadena Theosophical Society's recent online publication of the references to *The Secret Doctrine*. (Theosophical Society Pasadena).<sup>75</sup>

What is one to make of her references? Whether she actually sourced them directly, or whether she knew a number of them via a few select secondary sources, is not directly relevant to me. That is a relatively uninteresting historical question of method, and I am privileging the product over the production, the surface statement over the emergent conditions. The basic questions remain the same. How did they influence her? What contribution, if any, did they make in the unfolding and development of her comparative enterprise? Are we looking for her "system" before she herself wrote? Did she selectively quote to support an argument? What is to be gained by tracing every one of the bibliographic references? I have touched on this theme earlier. If we accept the idea that semantic value is rooted in a larger narrative placing, then there is relatively little to be gained by tracking

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<sup>75</sup>For completeness sake two further sources might be mentioned. Wizard's Bookshelf published a 1977 reference list to *The Secret Doctrine* and William Savage produced an unpublished study of references in *The Secret Doctrine* (Savage 2016). It is my understanding that both these works have been taken up into the Pasadena *Secret Doctrine* References published online (Theosophical Society Pasadena).

every quoted sentence or statement. Of course, it is of interest which books H. P. Blavatsky may have quoted from, but she cannot “mean” precisely what a seventeenth-century author meant, or a twelfth-century author, or an earlier or later writer. Nor can the justificatory mechanisms, resources, and context be the same. To quote a sentence from an Egyptian text or a sixteenth-century philosophical text in support of a nineteenth-century theory is to do nothing but privilege, inevitably, the present over the past. Blavatsky’s interpretive system could not pre-exist her, or her context, no matter how convincing the superficial similarities from the past may appear.

## 5) THE INTERSECTION

H. P. Blavatsky mentioned well over 2000 individual authors across her works and it would likely be easier to list recognized authors in the field of comparative religion that she did not mention than those she did. To speak of “influence” regarding the diverse series of authors referenced may be a fruitless endeavour. It is quite possible that a single sentence or thought in a minor work may have influenced Blavatsky disproportionately, while a frequently referenced work could, for example, be referenced simply because it was convenient, popular, or a foil for her own thoughts. Furthermore, accepted histories of the field already betray exclusions of which I am suspicious.<sup>76</sup> It strikes me that the best way to understand what H. P. Blavatsky is doing is to examine how she *uses* the works she references. As I am arguing that meaning is obtained through use, and is determined through a content holism, I believe this will illustrate Blavatsky’s methodology in practice.

To locate Blavatsky in the field of comparative religion I cross-referenced here author references to those in standard works on the history of the field. This produced a list of approximately 143 authors. Cross-referencing this with Coleman’s list of books Blavatsky plagiarised from produced the following authors: Baron C. C. J. Bunsen (1791-1860), James Darmesteter (1849-1894), Paul Decharme (1839-1905), Louis Jacolliot (1837-1890), F. Max Müller (1823-1900), A. De Quatrefages (1810-1892), H. H. Wilson (1786-1860), and T. W.

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<sup>76</sup>An example of an excluded actor is J. S. C. Schweigger (1779-1857). In *Isis Unveiled*, H. P. Blavatsky claimed that Schweigger’s works had proven that mythological symbolism had a scientific foundation, which makes his omission in *The Secret Doctrine* noticeable (1988a, vol. I, 23; Phillips 2007, 40-67). Examples of influential authors who had published during her lifetime include Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx, though these figures do not seem to have influenced any of the main mid to late nineteenth-century founding fathers of comparative religion.

Rhys Davids (1843-1922). If I confine myself to the overlap of authors mentioned by Blavatsky and significant in the history of comparative religion we obtain the following list: Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), E. B. Tylor (1832-1917), F. Max Müller, Charles Darwin (1809-1882), G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), David Hume (1711-1776), William Jones (1746-1794), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Goblet de Alviella (1846-1925), Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Adolf Bastian (1826-1905), Baron C. C. J. Bunsen, Auguste Comte (1798-1857), H. T. Colebrook (1765-1837), Ernest Renan (1823-1892), T. W. Rhys Davids, Karl W. F. Von Schlegel (1772-1829), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), William. D. Whitney (1827-1894), and Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920). Additional authors actors important to the field and whom Blavatsky does mention includes, G. F. Creuzer (1771-1858), Jean Bodin (1530-1596), Franz Bopp (1791-1867), Emile-Louis Burnouf (1821-1907) and Eugene Burnouf (1801-1852), James Freeman Clarke (1810-1888), C. F. Dupuis (1742-1809), J. J. Von Gorres (1776-1848), Sir John Lubbock (1834-1913), K. O. Müller (1797-1840), **Edward Pococke** ( ), F. D. E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Important authors in the field, but for which I found no reference in Blavatsky's writing include, James G. Frazer (1854-1941), William Robertson Smith (1846-1894), Cornelis P. Tiele (1830-1902), Chantepie de la Saussaye (1848-1920), John F. McLennan (1827-1881), William James (1842-1910), Andrew M. Fairbairn (1838-1912), Joseph E. Carpenter (1844-1927), F. D. Maurice (1805-1872), and Charles Hardwick (1821-1859). Of the more prominent Comparative Theologians identified by Masuzawa, we might add the following names to the list of unmentioned authors, Samuel Henry Kellog (1839-1899), and James Clement Moffatt (1811-1890). Andrew Lang (1844-1912) does not appear to have been referenced in any of H. P. Blavatsky's works.

Clearly, I lack the space to examine 2000 authors in any detail. I have, therefore, selected the following list of actors and themes to illustrate H. P. Blavatsky in action:

- George Oliver on the seven-fold constitution of the individual,
- E. B. Tylor as referenced by H. P. Blavatsky,
- Herbert Spencer on the "Unknowable," and
- F. Max Müller as referenced by H. P. Blavatsky.

Any thorough study of H. P. Blavatsky would entail examining each and every use, whether direct or indirect, of all works and authors referenced. I hope that the present selection will show her general methodology and that a broader study, which must be undertaken, will confirm this.

### 5.1) George Oliver on the Seven-fold Constitution

The seven-fold constitution is fundamental to H. P. Blavatsky's presentation. In *The Secret Doctrine* she references two works in support of this classification, Gerald Massey's lecture entitled, "The Seven Souls of Man, and their Culmination in the Christ" (1992) published originally in 1886, and George Oliver's, *The Pythagorean Triangle* (1975) published originally in 1875 (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 632, 640-1). I discuss, briefly, the place of the latter in *The Secret Doctrine*. Massey's contribution is problematic due to it post-dating the presenting of the classic seven-fold Theosophical classification and, in fact, it includes references to Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883). Coleman suggested that George Oliver, a well-known freemason, was one of the minor sources from which H. P. Blavatsky drew (2004, 9). But what does this actually mean?



I place the extracts side by side below,

George Oliver	H. P. Blavatsky
<p>The Theosophic philosophy, which was copiously introduced into the counterfeit Masonry practised on the Continent during the last century, counted seven properties in man – viz.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The divine golden man.</li> <li>2. The inward holy body from fire and light, like pure silver.</li> <li>3. The elemental man.</li> <li>4. The mercurial growing paradisiacal man.</li> <li>5. The martial soul-like man.</li> <li>6. The venerine, according to the outward desire.</li> <li>7. The solar man, an inspector of the wonders of God.</li> </ol> <p>They had also seven fountain spirits, or powers of nature, called Binding, Attraction, Anguish, Fire, Light, Sound, and Body (Oliver 1975, 179).</p>	<p>“The Theosophic Philosophy counted SEVEN <i>properties</i> (or principles), in Man, viz.:-</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The divine golden Man;</li> <li>2. The inward holy body from fire and light, like pure silver;</li> <li>3. The elemental man;</li> <li>4. The mercurial paradisiacal man;</li> <li>5. The martial Soul-like man;</li> <li>6. The passionate man of desires;</li> <li>7. The Solar man; a witness to and inspector of the wonders of the Universe.</li> </ol> <p>They had also <i>seven fountain</i> Spirits, or Powers of Nature.” (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 640-41).</p>

A few preliminary points, beyond random capitalising and italicising amendments, might be noted before I make the more obvious points. Firstly, though presenting this entire passage in “quotation marks,” Blavatsky has in fact not copied it exactly. Secondly, she has inserted an explanatory note, “(or principles),” into the passage giving a Theosophical connotation to the terms. Thirdly, she has excised the Christian underpinning of the original text by substituting “Universe” for “God.” More pertinently, we see that H. P. Blavatsky presents this Masonic reading as a “jumbled account and distribution of Western theosophic philosophy” which compared unfavourable to her own “theosophic explanations by the Eastern School of

Theosophy” (1988b, vol. II, 641). Furthermore, it is clear that beyond the fact that a classification of seven is being presented, George Oliver and H. P. Blavatsky simply do not mean the same thing. By the time *The Secret Doctrine* is written Blavatsky’s scheme and vocabulary had been worked out. When she refers to, for example, the fourth principle, this is intimately linked to “desire,” is seven-fold itself, is part of an evolutionary scheme of rounds and root-races, and is in a complicated and specific relation with the seven cosmic planes. George Oliver would not have recognized Blavatsky’s Theosophical content in his works, and Blavatsky is largely unconcerned, in this instance, with what Oliver was saying. They both reference the number seven in relation to the human being, but the similarities end there. Blavatsky has, in effect, interpreted, appropriated, and re-presented Oliver’s work in service of her larger project. To call this plagiarism or to suggest Oliver “influenced” H. P. Blavatsky is a mistake; she quite simply read through him and found what she was looking for, her own thoughts.

## 5.2) E. B. Tylor as Referenced

Blavatsky makes only a few scattered references to E. B. Tylor throughout her works. The chief relevance of discussing her referring statements is to illustrate the way in which she makes use of contemporary authors and fields of knowledge.

Blavatsky refers to E. B. Tylor’s (sometimes ‘Tyler’) *Researches into the Early History of Mankind* (1865) in *Isis Unveiled* (1988a, vol. I, 246-48). Following the complete references in the text it becomes apparent that she is drawing from Max Müller’s essay *On Manners and Customs* in his *Chips from a German Workshop: Volume II* (1876), and does not appear to have worked with Tylor’s book directly. The general theme in Max Müller’s review of Tylor’s *Researches* is how to account for apparently similar beliefs, superstitions, and the like which appeared to exist around the world in different cultures, some of which were linked historically and some seemingly not. The two examples discussed by Blavatsky are the belief that certain plants and humans may have some sort of sympathetic relation, and a reference to a Pythagorean maxim, “Do not stir fire with a sword.”

Blavatsky is making a number of points in relation to these extracts. She wonders why science would not investigate the supposed relation between plants and humans – a sympathetic relation she feels has universal testimony to support it. Part of her answer is that

science has decided to ignore any type of evidence which is beyond that of the five senses. Contemporary materialistic science is closed to anything which transcends its own imposed boundaries. She links this to the notion, seemingly referenced to Plato, that humanity cycles through periods of spiritually and intellectually fertile and barren periods, and suggests that the eighteenth century heralded a sceptical and barren period of which the nineteenth century is an inheritor.

She uses the seemingly universal prevalence of the idea contained in the Pythagorean maxim as proof that “*magic* [here a body of occult and moral truths] *was a universal science, entirely in the hands of the sacerdotal savant*” (1988a, vol. I, 247). Various explanations emerge as the seeming similarity demands explanation. These include diffusion, European influence on newly contacted cultures, coincidence, and Blavatsky’s “universal science” and facts found in nature itself. For Blavatsky, inner senses are real, appeals to universal testimony as a reliable gauge is sanctioned, and “savages” and “civilized” peoples lived side by side in all ages. This allows her to see scientific, rational truths hidden in the statements, proverbs, and superstitions of the past and present.

Researchers at the Headquarters of the Pasadena Theosophical Society have identified three references in *The Secret Doctrine* to Tylor’s *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 9<sup>th</sup> Edition (1878) entry on “Anthropology” (1988b, vol. II, 67, 70, 687). These references, found in volume two (Anthropogenesis) of *The Secret Doctrine*, are short sentence length extractions from the same subsection of Tylor’s article on the “Antiquity of Man.” Blavatsky’s use of the article is relatively uncontroversial and she, in fact, makes little use of the entry. She points to uncertainties, cautionary remarks, and open questions in the text and through these inserts her own position. By 1888 H. P. Blavatsky had a mature vocabulary and a settled position, which she was then trying to establish in relation to existing debates and positions.

Reading Tylor’s full article is illuminating. He sets up a series of distinctions between Theology and Anthropology, Creation and Evolution, Spiritualistic and Materialistic, and Supernatural and Natural theories of the human being. It is clear that he favours the latter in every instance and, given his assessment of the spiritualistic phenomena years earlier, this is not unexpected. However, a reading of the article, in particular the sections “Man’s Place in Nature” and the “Origin of Man,” reveals both the un-finalised state of the debates and Tylor’s anticipation of future scientific justification. Perhaps Blavatsky’s own expectation of future scientific vindication was not out of place in its time. Throughout the entry Tylor felt

compelled to note that both sides of the debates could “count among their adherents men of high rank in science” (Tylor 1878, 110, 111). I think the justificatory power of this admission is important. The gaps, historical lacunae, in the history of the “prehistoric ages” is filled by Blavatsky with the knowledge of the “spiritual eagle eye of the seer,” and for her “records exist” that support her theories (1988b, vol. II, 67). In this instance, she presents a reading of the Hindu *manvantaras* and *yugas* in support of her chronological dating of humanity (1988b, vol. II, 68-70). This leads me back to one of my premises, that there either is or is not a wisdom tradition from which H. P. Blavatsky drew. Irrespective of the answer, and in current academic circles the answer is negative, H. P. Blavatsky presented a coherent position on contemporary debates which she claims was drawn from such tradition, and this position is logical, rational, and rhetorical when read in historical context.

I have been able to locate only two occurrences of the term “animism” in Blavatsky’s writings. One reference is found in her posthumous *Theosophical Glossary* as part of a quote with no relevance for my purposes. A second, more relevant footnote, part of which I reproduce here, notes,

\*“*Animalism*” is quite an appropriate word to use (whoever invented it) as a contrast to Mr. Tylor’s term “animism,” which he applied to all “*Lower Races*” of mankind who believe the soul a distinct entity. He finds that the words *psyche*, *pneuma*, *animus*, *spiritus*, etc., all belong to the same cycle of superstition in the “lower stages of culture,” Professor A. Bain dubbing all these distinctions, moreover, as a “plurality of souls” and a “double materialism.” (Blavatsky 1980, 351)

Animalism was the evolutionary notion that human beings were simply another animal and shared much in common with the animals. The broader context of the article in which this footnote is found relates to human psychology and the function of the will. In short, Blavatsky is rejecting any physiological (animalistic) explanation for the “higher human functions and phenomena of the mind.” Opposing any solely material explanation of the mind, she expresses the wish that physiological theories should not trespass into the realm of immaterial psychology and mind. Blavatsky locates, then, the higher functions in an immaterial or non-physical mind.

We might note a number of things. Though I have not pursued it here Blavatsky, later in the same article, references authors who appear to support her general position of an immaterial mind, including George T. Ladd’s *Elements of Physiological Psychology* (1887). I could add

my own reference: James Sully (1842-1923) noted on this issue, “These questions have not yet been answered by accepted scientific methods” (1892, 690).<sup>77</sup> The general sense is to remove the question of the reality of the mind as an independent entity from the purview of materialistic science into the realm of philosophy and metaphysics. That the problem of the mind and body was not resolved by Victorian society is also confirmed by Janet Oppenheim in her assessment of the field (1985, 205). Richard Rorty provides a fruitful way to read this state of affairs. There is no epistemological foundation with which to ground truth claims, and no argument is legitimately won with such claims. Instead, people begin to stop using an older vocabulary and begin to use a new one for individual and societal reasons. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, through the activities of thousands of individuals and works, the older language of an immaterial mind began to be eclipsed by new habits and new debates.<sup>78</sup> Blavatsky penned the above in 1890 and not only had the change into the new vocabulary not yet decisively occurred, but spiritualist and séance phenomena had given a new impetus to the older claims. The dating is also important as the article reveals Blavatsky translating the debate into her own now evolved terminology. Further in the article she will invoke the terms *manas*, higher-mind, lower-mind, individuality and personality to explain her position.

Additionally, we note that the references to E. B. Tylor and animism in this article appear to be drawn straight from Bain’s *Mind and Body* (1873). Blavatsky, at least in this instance, does not seem to have made first hand use of any of Tylor’s works. This may at least offer an explanation as to why she feels “animalism” is a better term than “animism.” One can only speculate that she did not know precisely what Tylor meant by animism, or did not appreciate the context in which he used the concept. The replacing of animism by animalism makes no real sense in relation to what animism as a concept was meant to convey in Tylor’s theory. We might conclude that H. P. Blavatsky was well-informed on debates relating to the mind/body problem but seems relatively uninformed on Tylor’s theory of religion. Tylor’s position is unlikely to have appealed to her given their opposing orientations to séance phenomena outlined earlier.

Blavatsky appears to have little direct contact with Tylor’s ideas and works. She seems not to have fully understood, at least in the context of her references, his concept of animism as the

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<sup>77</sup>Janet Oppenheim identifies James Sully as one of the “leading figures in British psychology” in the nineteenth century (1985, 237).

<sup>78</sup>As a practical example of this Hasok Chang, in his study of phlogiston and the varied responses to its “eclipse,” calls for a case-by-case study of general factors on individual participants to properly understand events (2010, 69).

origin of religion, and would not have endorsed it if she had. She uses and quotes Tylor, sometimes second hand, only in support of her own arguments and train of thought. She is not consciously in competition with Tylor as, for example Max Müller was, in terms of presenting an explanatory theory of religion to the public. She seems largely unaware of Tylor and the details of his works and is moving along her own trajectory. Both of them, however, are rooted in the nineteenth century and this is revealed in their appeal to the comparative method, the potential in science to justify their positions, and their response to spiritualistic phenomena. That they read the nineteenth century differently reveals the richness of the imagination, not a distinction between progressive and retrogressive.

### 5.3) Herbert Spencer and the “Unknowable”

Though H. P. Blavatsky made no systematic study of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) she made frequent reference to him, at one point referring to him as “the greatest philosopher of England” (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 600).<sup>79</sup> Despite this assessment, H. P. Blavatsky is not an uncritical follower of Herbert Spencer, instead making use of him in pursuit of her own agenda as she did of other prominent nineteenth-century figures. While both Spencer and Blavatsky drew on the resources of their day, though not necessarily or directly the same resources, they each read the world differently. Both could present the same sentences and examples, but draw different conclusions from them. An example will suffice. Discussing “human beliefs” (i.e. religious beliefs, though not exclusively) seemingly at odds with the “facts,” Spencer suggests that they may still contain “some small amount of truth” (1937, 3). Blavatsky could no doubt say the same, the difference being in the nature of the “truth” to be found. As an instance, Spencer goes on to discuss the evolution, the “progress of civilization,” of political government ranging from ancient theories of divine kingship and demi-gods to his contemporary England’s monarchy and parliamentary arrangement. The “truth” he draws from this is not that one arrangement is true and the other false. The broad and abstract truth for him is that, irrespective of the precise form of government, each recognizes the “unquestionable fact” that individual rights are subordinated to broader societal needs and values (1937, 4-7). Blavatsky, having little overt interest in political governance, read the decreasing spiritual status of society’s rulers in the light of her root-

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<sup>79</sup>In addition to his Spencer’s own writings H.P. Blavatsky shows an awareness of secondary literature on him, including Spencer’s engagement with Frederic Harrison collated in Youman’s *The Nature of Reality of Religion: a Controversy between Frederic Harrison and Herbert Spencer* (1885) (Blavatsky 2010, 568-69).

races and the cyclic descent of spirit into matter. For her, there were in human history superior human beings who could be called “divine” or “demi-gods” in comparison to a later, more material humanity. They ruled by the natural right of an inherent spiritual superiority, a status which was not a “belief of the people” but a fact of natural evolution.<sup>80</sup>

Blavatsky can draw an idea, a term, a sentence, or a paragraph from Spencer’s works in support of or as a foil for her writings. I am interested in those ideas she drew into her narrative but which take on a different meaning due to the *scope of application*. Specifically, I will review Blavatsky’s engagement with Herbert Spencer’s concept of the “Unknowable.” In relation to Herbert Spencer she begins with a number of broad accommodating gestures, which appropriating techniques reflect the importance of Spencer in the late nineteenth century. Her first accommodating move is a simple mention. By drawing Spencer’s name and vocabulary into her narrative she is weaving his authority into her work. Secondly, she simultaneously accommodates and dilutes his ideas by claiming that many contemporary scientific and philosophic ideas are merely new presentations, pale copies, of ancient ideas (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. I, 248-49; Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 96). This takes on a specific meaning in Blavatsky’s writings: in her conception if one goes far enough back in Theosophical human history the link between cycles and the early races, with their natural spiritual state in distinction to the material state of humanity in the nineteenth century, is emphasised (1988a, vol. I, 424). An additional broad move is to claim Spencer’s ideas as being either anticipated by or taken from Asian or esoteric sources (Blavatsky 1982, 92; Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 79).

Having laid the groundwork to accommodate some of Spencer’s ideas Blavatsky then moves to frame the debate by *placing* Spencer and his ideas. The first placing focuses on where his concepts, for example, the Unknowable, belong on her Theosophical template. The second placing is her locating Herbert Spencer in relation to the debates of the day. Her second move involves her characterising Spencer as a “positivist” [erroneously, though she was not alone in this], of his ideas being “tainted by materialism,” and of him as presenting a “material metaphysics” (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 156; Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 327; Blavatsky 1982, 95-96). Referring to the “Unknowable,” the later Theosophist G. de Purucker summed up the consequences of this line of thinking by noting,

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<sup>80</sup>H. P. Blavatsky’s reading of Herodotus on the Egyptian Dynasties is an example of this (1988b, vol. II, 367-69).

However, it [the Unknowable] has been used by modern agnostics, in particular Herbert Spencer, to denote things which are not unknowable, but merely the noumenal which underlies the phenomenal, which limits the knowable world only to that which we can comprehend with our present physical faculties and the mental notions based on them. It is therefore but a convenient way of shelving all inquiries which seem to stand in the way of the formulation of a materialistic philosophy.<sup>81</sup> (Purucker 2016)

I believe H. P. Blavatsky would concur. Specifically, we are dealing with a different anthropology, the crucial distinction relating to the mind, states of consciousness, and what it is possible for a human being to know. What are the limits of knowledge, what is unknown, and what is unknowable? Earlier I argued that many of the issues raised by H. P. Blavatsky centred on questions of epistemology and the associated ideas which flow from it. Bernard Lightman has highlighted the epistemological nature of Spencer's, and others, agnosticism and suggests that what is "essential" about this version of agnosticism is "the belief that there are inherent and constitutive limits of human cognition" (Lightman 1987, 15-6). Richard Rorty's critique of epistemology has shown us that while we can note the epistemological debates of the past we cannot resolve the issues through appeal to them. To avoid the circularity of past positions we need to reframe the debate through a new vocabulary.

In an 1889 discussion referencing Spencer and human states of consciousness, H. P. Blavatsky makes brief mention of "seven states of consciousness" and "higher states of metaphysical consciousness" (2010, 514). The suggestion being that Spencer was unaware of these additional states and of the implications flowing from their existence. Blavatsky had written more fully on this very topic in 1887, though the article was only published posthumously in 1896. In her article, "Modern Idealism," she argues that Spencer "knows, it appears, of but one grade of subjectivity, and has no idea of the occult (*Yogic*) teaching, of the existence of other and higher planes of consciousness, vision or perception, than those of Mind" (Blavatsky 1960, 96). In this instance she distinguishes between the *manas* and *buddhi* principle in the human constitution. H. P. Blavatsky draws the Theosophical conclusion that, "It is the overshadowing of the Mind by *Buddhi* which results in ultimate *realization of existence* – *i.e.*, self-consciousness in its purest form" (1960, 96). The implication of this is

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<sup>81</sup>This is one of the ways Spencer was read in the late nineteenth century, though Lightman has revealed the religious dimension in his work (1987, 89).



that the higher-self, the spiritual human being, can obtain knowledge that the lower-self, the ego, the “brain mind,” etc. cannot access.

In his *First Principles* Herbert Spencer criticises Tait and Stewart’s work *The Unseen Universe*, a book H. P. Blavatsky drew on. For Spencer, *The Unseen Universe* contains statements about an invisible and unseen Universe which cannot “be the subject of any observation or experiment” (1937, 507-8). In contrast, the invisible side of nature is open to Blavatsky’s evolved human being, a type of humanity underwritten by the reality of the spiritualist and other occult phenomena of her day. This was one of the battles of the nineteenth century, the nature of the human being centred on the nature and capabilities of the mind. Many forms of agnosticism, and where to draw the line between what is unknown and what is unknowable, are challenged by the acceptance of the scientific status of supernormal phenomena.<sup>82</sup> H. P. Blavatsky, we have seen, concedes the material world to material science. It is with respect to the inner states of mind and the corresponding inner planes that she feels Theosophy has a contribution to make.

This leads into H. P. Blavatsky’s placing of Spencer’s Unknowable within her Theosophical framework. She begins by suggesting that Spencer’s concept of the Unknowable is only a “dim” or “faint” reflection of the real occult idea to which H. P. Blavatsky suggests it points (1988b, vol. I, 14, 281). She further argues that Spencer’s thought demonstrates “the lethal influence of materialistic thought” and anthropomorphism (1988b, vol. I, 327; 2010, 282). Having made these observations she makes the critical point that Herbert Spencer has made a philosophical mistake by confusing the Unknowable with the First Cause. In a specific act of domestication, H. P. Blavatsky proposes that the Spencer’s First Cause corresponds to her First Unmanifested Logos, and the Unknowable proper corresponds to her 1<sup>st</sup> Fundamental Proposition (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 14-5; 2010, 72-3, 568). The Theosophical Unknowable is “an Omnipresent, Eternal, Boundless, and Immutable PRINCIPLE on which all speculation is impossible, since it transcends the power of human conception and could only be dwarfed

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<sup>82</sup>This last statement is drawn into clear relief by Richard Bithell’s, a minor nineteenth-century agnostic, *A Handbook of Scientific Agnosticism* (1892). The foundations of “scientific agnosticism” are the facts presented to consciousness and the logical inferences which can be drawn from them. This allows Bithell to reject “ghouls” and “spectres” but leave open the possibility of thought-transference and planchette-writing. Bithell then proposes a conception of humanity in its “present state of development,” allowing for the potential unfolding of additional senses in the future. For H. P. Blavatsky there was already sufficient evidence of evolved human beings with additional senses and states of consciousness. Agnosticism implies a specific anthropology, the precise thing which is under debate and negotiation in the nineteenth century. Blavatsky will accept that there is a point at which human knowledge reaches its limits. The point at which that limit is reached is the issue at stake.

by any human expression or similitude” (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 14). Synonyms include, the “Abstract All,” “Causeless One Cause,” “Rootless Root,” the “Unknown Darkness,” “*Parabrahman*,” the “One Absolute Reality,” the “Absolute Cause,” “En-Soph” and others. The First Cause is the first unconscious radiation or emanation of the Absolute, essentially an “effect” of the latter (Blavatsky 2010, 72, 125). The First Cause is only unknown, the Absolute Reality is alone unknowable.

Blavatsky is alert, at least rhetorically, to the limits of language, specifically the English language, in expressing these spiritual and philosophical concepts though this does not prevent her from penning volumes on various topics (2010, 73). Once she has appropriated an idea by translating it into her own vocabulary her manipulation and use of that idea is enabled. The Theosophical vocabulary inserts itself throughout world scriptures. As an instance, Barborka provides a preliminary list of synonyms for the “Boundless, Immutable Principle,” the Theosophical version of the Unknowable, including, “Tat (Vedic) – Parabrahman (Vedantic) – Sat (Brahmanical) – Ain Soph (Kabbalistic) – Tien-Sin (Chinese) – Rootless Root of All (Stanzas) – Oeaoohoo (Stanzas) – Ever-Darkness (of Stanzas) – the Boundless” (1992, 482). This, or any obtaining Theosophical entry point, allows for a re-orientation and re-structuring of the text at hand.

How can we assess Blavatsky’s reading and use of Spencer’s concept of the Unknowable? A point to stress is that Blavatsky is not a scholar of Herbert Spencer, belongs to no “Spencerian” school of philosophy, and we should, therefore, not expect to see her trying to “get him right.” She is not attempting to explain and clarify his ideas for the larger public. Following her own trajectory, she is creatively using, reworking, and re-describing ideas and concepts wherever she finds them to aid in her self-expression. A further point to note is that her Theosophical reading is not a radical break with Herbert Spencer’s own presentation. Instead, Blavatsky has, in one sense, a different scope of application. This scope of application reflects her understanding of the nature of the universe and of the human mind. Both nature and the human mind have inner, invisible (to ordinary consciousness) dimensions, beyond which reach is the place of the Unknowable. In short, then, in answer to my original question at the beginning of this paragraph, I can see no profit in *evaluating* her use of Spencer.

I am opposed to a simple juxtaposition of two independent narratives, and I do not believe there is any limit to the ways in which Spencer may be used or read.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, Spencer, as has been argued by Fitzgerald, produced no completely integrated system of thought (1987, 477). H. P. Blavatsky may have incorporated aspects of the various strands of thought which run through his work, and to tease out which aspects these are would be both tedious and un-enlightening. Blavatsky herself may well be shown one day, if this has not been done already, to have presented contrary and disjointed ideas on many individual topics. To link and compare all these perspectives does not seem fruitful. My goal has been to present an understanding of H. P. Blavatsky's works, and I have done this through the locating of a holistic and developmental framework within her work. I could have told a different story, and others will tell theirs. A few examples may suffice. H. P. Blavatsky writes that the science of Occultism rests on the "illusory nature of matter" and on the "infinite divisibility of the atom" (1988b, vol. I, 520). Spencer, in his *First Principles*, argues that science cannot answer whether matter is infinitely divisible or not (1937, 41-44). Secondly, Timothy Fitzgerald lists a number of related terms in Spencer's works,

- (a) The Real, the Actual, the Noumenon, the First Cause, the Infinite, the Absolute; the Inscrutable Power; and (b) appearances; the apparent; the phenomenal; the relative, etc (1987, 481).

Excepting the First Cause, and possibly the Inscrutable Power, Blavatsky would largely endorse this basic division and terminology.

A final example involves word play around the terms and concepts of "instinct," "reason," and "divine gift." Discussing Herbert Spencer's epistemology, George H. Smith notes,

Reason, for Spencer, is the result of organic evolution, and evolution teaches us that there are no radical discontinuities, or breaks, in nature. Apparent differences of kind invariably shade into differences of degree. Reason is no exception. It is not a gift of the gods, a capacity unique to man. It is simply a more highly developed form of instinct, and as such it is subject to the limitations imposed by organic structure – i.e., the biological, physiological, and psychological nature of man. (1981, 115)

Here is an early H. P. Blavatsky on a similar theme,

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<sup>83</sup>Perhaps, one thinks too much latitude is given to H. P. Blavatsky here. But, this is no more than was granted Rorty, who has been accused of "very controversial" interpretations in service of his broader vision (Tartaglia 2007, 22).

Instinct is the universal endowment of nature by the Spirit of the Deity itself; reason the slow development of our physical constitution, an evolution of our adult material brain. (1988a, vol. I, 425)

This statement appears to denote agreement on the evolution of reason, though Blavatsky can find place for instinct as an “endowment of nature by the Spirit of the Deity itself.” Putting aside that I have simply wrenched these two passages from their contexts, Blavatsky does not believe in “endowments” or “gifts” from any Divine Being. Instinct, rooted in the inherent spiritual nature of human beings, in all life, and in nature itself, is not something “bestowed.” It is part of the intrinsic nature of all things, and in her later terminology this would be explained with reference to her *buddhi* principle which, linked to the *atman* principle, is the divine monad, the essence of all beings. Everything, furthermore, is under the sway of evolution and *karma*. “Evolution” is a further important concept common to both Spencer’s and Blavatsky’s thought world, though a little scratching will dispel many superficial similarities.

I am not sure there is much to learn from these examples. It is more profitable to focus on “use” than on assessing and evaluating one system against the other. The Unknowable was the point of reconciliation that Spencer proposed between science and religion. For Spencer, both science and religion are ultimately agreed on the existence of an inscrutable “mystery” beyond the capacity of legitimate human speculation. This reconciliation, however, is not “the synthesis of science, religion, and philosophy” that *The Secret Doctrine* promised. Blavatsky did not work to relativize knowledge of the phenomenal or manifested world, instead, she worked to establish the truths of this world, however relative to her Absolute they and all manifested beings may be. In a sense, then, H. P. Blavatsky’s broad movement is in opposition to that of Herbert Spencer’s, who looked to the limits of knowledge, not its fixing.

For completeness sake, it remains for something to be said about Herbert Spencer’s perspective on religion and its origin.<sup>84</sup> Spencer placed his “ghost theory” and euhemerism within a broad evolutionary perspective. “Primitive man” mistook figures in dreams as human doubles, and applied anthropomorphic causal explanations for natural phenomena (Spencer 1937, 23, 35). Initially, due to inadequate reasoning faculties, early humanity conceived of the double figures in dreams and of the ancestral dead as corporeal, very much

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<sup>84</sup>Spencer outlines his theory in various works, and the first volume of his *The Principles of Sociology* (1877) contains a comprehensive presentation on this topic.

in the like of living human beings. As early humanity evolved their conceptions of these ghost figures became subtler, less tangible, more complex, and less material in nature. There is a “germ of truth” in these initial conceptions, not in detail, but in the “apprehension” or “intuition” of that “Infinite and Eternal Energy” that exists beyond consciousness and from which all things proceed. Various conceptions of invisible agency are proposed in the systems of polytheism, monotheism, and pantheism. However, as the scientific enterprise evolved, science being defined as “all definite knowledge of the order existing among phenomena,” it purified religion of its superstitious and erroneous explanations of the world (1937, 84).<sup>85</sup> As humanity and science evolve religion is forced to reposition itself in relation to the new scientific knowledge. At the foundation of religion is an “intuition” of the mystery of the Unknowable, and its religious explanations in beliefs, creeds, and doctrines must change as science progresses and undoes the misconceptions inevitably presented.

H. P. Blavatsky raised a challenge to these intellectualist theories. She frames the debate in reference to “soul-survival” and asks how such a pervasive and persistent idea in human history and culture could “be but a shadowy and unreal intellectual conception originating with ‘primitive man’” (n.d., 178)? She claimed that Spencer and Max Müller had provided no explanation as to the origin of the “hope for a future life.” She argued that even if it were conceded that Spencer and Max Müller, we might add Tylor here, could explain the origins of this belief of early humanity in terms of primitive uneducated responses to natural phenomena and psychic life, this does not explain the contemporary beliefs of educated and scientific spiritualists (n.d., 170).<sup>86</sup> She too links the beliefs of “primitive” and “savage” peoples to those of nineteenth-century spiritualists, as had Tylor. The difference being that in her conception the nineteenth-century séance and spiritualist phenomena were real as were, therefore, the phenomena of the past and the “uncivilized” present. H. P. Blavatsky spends some effort in her writings outlining the nature of the after-death states and of the entities experienced during spiritualistic phenomena. We shall see in the next sub-section that she resolves this question with an appeal to Max Müller’s faculty of intuition, a faculty she relates to Spencer’s intuition of the Unknowable. While her vocabulary will only mature in her later writings, this intuitive faculty is an inherent principle in the human constitution, the

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<sup>85</sup>An example of this is Spencer’s explanation of the symbol of the Sun being “a chariot of a god, drawn by horses” (Spencer 1937, 85). For Spencer, this metaphor of “mechanical traction” would be replaced by new metaphors as science presented new theories of motion. It may be significant that *surya* drawn by seven horses, or a seven headed horse, was interpreted by H. P. Blavatsky in reference to number symbolism. For her, the symbolism of the image reveals the seven-fold nature of the sun and the solar system.

<sup>86</sup>Spencer, revealing his hand, refers to the “superstitions of the “spiritualists”” (1877, 154).

*buddhic* principle, which allows for a deeper form of knowledge than strict rationality which she confines to the lower mind.

I am compelled to make a final point. Much has been made of H. P. Blavatsky's amateur status, her lack of first-hand or competent knowledge of ideas of the day, and of her reliance on a limited selection of resources to pen her works. Bernard Lightman made the following comment concerning Herbert Spencer,

Rarely has an intellectual read so little and produced so many volumes. The sources of Spencer's thought were the occasional book he did read (such as Mansel's Bampton Lectures), a fertile imagination, conversations with friends, and newspaper articles, all of which helped him to breathe the intellectual air of his times. (1987, 72)

Many of the exclusionary mechanisms arrayed against Blavatsky are ruses which hide a deeper normative agenda at work. These strategies have long been unmasked and it remains for Blavatsky to be freed from the prejudices of the past and present. Both Herbert Spencer and H. P. Blavatsky wove stories about humanity and the origin of religion. The nineteenth century produced numerous narratives and the role of historians is to recapture, as best we can, these tales. The reason we do this is not to find the one true story, rather, it is to gain an appreciation of past endeavours in explaining ourselves to and for ourselves.

#### 5.4) F. MaxMüller

H. P. Blavatsky and Theosophy have been linked to F. Max Müller in a number of studies.<sup>87</sup> She references him relatively frequently throughout her works though she makes no detailed

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<sup>87</sup>General works on Max Müller include, Tomoko Masuzawa's article "Our Master's Voice: F. Max Müller after a Hundred Years of Solitude" (2003) which presents a summary of studies on Max Müller up to 2003. More recent contributions with reflections on Max Müller from various perspectives include Strenski's *Thinking about Religion: an Historical Introduction to Theories of Religion* (2006), Masuzawa's *The Invention of World Religions: or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (2005), Chidester's *Empire of Religion* (2014), and Molendijk's *Friedrich Max Müller & the Sacred Books of the East* (2016). Of specific relevance to my work are studies which have gone beyond mere sentence length mention of H. P. Blavatsky's enterprise in relation to Max Müller's. These include, Lubelsky's *Celestial India: Madame Blavatsky and the Birth of Indian Nationalism* (2012), Olst's "Max Müller and H. P. Blavatsky: Comparative Religion in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century" (2006), Pels "Occult Truths: Race, Conjecture, and Theosophy in Victorian Anthropology" in *Excluded Ancestors, Inventible Traditions: Essays toward a more inclusive History of Anthropology* (2000), Joseph's chapter "The Sources of the 'Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis'" in his *From Whitney to Chomsky: Essays in the History of American Linguistics* (2002), and Chidester's *Empire of Religion* (2014). Special attention should be given to the exchange of opinion over Theosophy and H. P. Blavatsky between the Theosophist A. P. Sinnett and Max Müller himself. The relevant articles are reprinted in Max Müller's *Last Essays: Second Series: Essays on the Science of Religion* (1901).

study of his theories. I can see no value in a broad based juxtaposition of her work against his. They clearly differed in many ways, and many seeming similarities will be shown to be superficial once individual statements are located within their broader holistic context. I present four examples, though mention of many more could be made. Bosch makes the following remark, “Müller’s view [...] was based on the idea that all religions were, in one way or the other, representative of the one truth and were historical manifestations of it” (2002, 422). I could make the same statement about H. P. Blavatsky, but this would mask more than it reveals. Secondly, could Max Müller’s innate human faculty to perceive the Infinite in the Finite share a resemblance to H. P. Blavatsky’s *buddhi* principle in the individual? My answer will be, no. Read holistically these concepts are separated in terms of origins, in terms of particular meaning, and in terms of the justificatory resources and mechanisms employed. Müller is indebted to Kantian notions of *a priori* categories. Blavatsky’s ideas emerge, in part, from the dualistic implications of spiritualistic phenomena. Thirdly, Bosch notes that Max Müller saw his views as being in continuity with Vedanta and Alexandrian speculative philosophy and its descendents (2002, 434). Certainly Blavatsky’s Theosophy shows an affinity with, among other traditions, Vedanta and mystical Western traditions. Finally, Bosch points to Max Müller’s concern that his work assist in humanity’s acceptance of God and the immortality of the Soul, both specific concerns of Blavatsky in *Isis Unveiled* (Blavatsky 1998a, vol. I, 36, 222; Bosch 2002, 433). I have considered various conceptions of these similarities. Is Blavatsky’s work a specific, concrete presentation of Max Müller’s more abstract and general thought? For example, while Max Müller can talk loosely of “innate” intuition, Blavatsky’s *buddhi* is a very specific notion. Are Max Müller’s and Blavatsky’s presentations both particular concretisations of broader, more abstract trends of thought in the late nineteenth century? Finally, do broad and abstract similarities signify anything useful? I am only partially satisfied with general commonalities between different actors, such as that noted by Rudbøg between H. P. Blavatsky, Max Müller, and P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye. He writes, “However, it should be noted that during the historical period in which Blavatsky lived, the idea of one ancient common source of religion and the diachronic search for it was actually a common venture among scholars of the science of religion” (Rudbøg 2010, 168). Noting such commonalities is only a preliminary step, by itself essentially meaningless. For one thing, the search for the origin of religion was hardly confined to the nineteenth century. I am interested with the specific surface statements of H. P. Blavatsky in their historical particularity. In the end, for my purposes, I have decided that a focus on specific and particular ideas in their historical singularity is more fruitful and

interesting. To phrase it another way, once they are admitted, it is not narrativity or general discursive themes that are interesting, but rather the specific, concrete tales that enthrall. I propose, therefore, to examine the *use* she made of Max Müller's works within her larger narrative and to review the manner in which his works served her as she developed her own varied themes. I will be studying, then, how Blavatsky accommodates, rejects, interprets, reworks, and orientates herself toward his ideas.

#### Orientation:

I find it instructive to enter this topic via my initial focal point, the reality of the séance, spiritualism, and associated phenomena. Discussing his use of the term "Theosophy," here is Max Müller on séance and associated phenomena: "It should be known once for all that one may call oneself a theosophist, without being suspected of believing in spirit-rappings, table-turnings, or any other occult sciences and black arts" (1895b, xvi). In his discussion of "esoteric Buddhism" with A. P. Sinnett, he makes related negative assessments concerning the reality of miracles (including H. P. Blavatsky's own phenomena), ghosts, and all manner of invisible beings that Blavatsky argued inhabited an invisible world (Müller 1901, 103, 109, 126). I have earlier outlined Blavatsky's positive stance on these phenomena and entities. Blavatsky and F. Max Müller entered the debates around religion from different points of view and the implications of this permeate each of their positions, rendering simplistic comparison unfruitful.

A further point of discrimination should be made here, linked to the one made above, which provides a basis for Blavatsky's interpretive enterprise. Blavatsky surveyed the knowledge fields of the late nineteenth century and produced a theory and interpretation of religion. She noticed a series of patterns inhering in the beliefs and traditions of the world and presented her distillation as the primordial, original religion of humankind. As the scholars of the day were not presenting any such theory, and Blavatsky could not claim legitimacy as an academic, she presented her theory as "esoteric" and "occult" and herself as an "esotericist" and "occultist." In a reciprocal process of finding and justifying she set about detailing her insights in her writings. Rooted in this, university academics are prone to think in terms of distinctions between professional/amateur and critical scholar/dilettante. We see Max Müller as the positive half and H. P. Blavatsky as the negative half of these polarities. The connotations associated with each position run deep, and I wish to continue my challenge to the usefulness of these distinctions. The challenge revolves around two moves. The first is



identifying the political nature of the accepted oppositions. The second queries whether other distinctions could not also be proposed. Let me deal with the second first. Through Blavatsky's writings we note a number of distinctions she drew, including, Orientalists/Orientals, honest scholars/dishonest scholars, academic/esotericist (occultist), and Western scholars/Asian scholars. To this, I propose, we add Western scholars/Western scholars due to the fact that European scholars were at odds with themselves on many issues. Max Müller could himself also distinguish between "native scholars and native scholars" (1901, 167). These are all viable binary distinctions beyond those which are normally invoked during the professionalising of a field.

To the first point: the political and exclusionary nature of the initial distinctions. Clearly, by professional we invoke connotations of true, reasoned, deep, methodological, and so on. Let us take Max Müller as an example. His theories were not uniformly accepted during his lifetime and were, in fact, heavily criticised by many of his contemporaries. Sharpe assessed him as becoming an anachronism with a waning star before he died (1986, 46). Today, if he were still being studied, we would reject him for privileging etymological speculations over the semantic value of terms. The point being, which part of being "professional" insulated him from irrelevancy, fanciful methodological speculations, dubious thoughts, and simple error? I am, obviously, not arguing that certain distinctions were not made in the late nineteenth century and should therefore not be taken cognisance of. I am suggesting that in *our* assessment of the field we would be better off dropping some of them. They serve no interesting interpretive purpose and create artificial boundaries that are better transgressed or erased. Consider, H. P. Blavatsky can often make statements like, "The esoteric teachings are xyz" or the "occult tradition teaches xyz." What, I wonder, is lost if she had used the word "my" instead of "esoteric" or "occult"? XYZ statements would remain the same. In a similar manner we might imagine Max Müller making statements such as, "the academic study of religion" or "the study of language shows xyz." A further point should be made here. Much is made of H. P. Blavatsky representing, consolidating, and reworking a Western esoteric tradition. Part of this is a reading of her works against and in continuity with texts from this "tradition." The point, thus far under-recognized, is that she used esoteric texts in much the same way as she used mainstream texts, adopting techniques of appropriation, selection, rejection, reformulating, and so on. I propose that the terms "academic," "esoteric," and "occult" are appeals to authority and reflect attempts to provide foundations for specific positions. Blavatsky and Max Müller produced theories of religion that should be given an

unbiased hearing to the extent that it is really possible. These nineteenth-century theories served a purpose; that purpose is the explanation of our own behaviour to ourselves. This is the purpose of all theories of religion and there is no real reason for any one theory to carry the day to the exclusion of others. This was not the case in the nineteenth century and is not the case now.

H. P. Blavatsky's entry point facilitated artificial binary distinctions of exoteric/esoteric and scholar (orientalist)/esotericist(occultist) that underwrote and orientated much of her work, including her engagement with Max Müller. Where Max Müller did not value one side of the polarity over the other he found the entire distinction dubious. But I have argued there is a rhetorical and functional identity in claims of authority grounded in being an "academic" or an "esotericist." Both claims are attempts to provide a foundation for theory, and all theory uncovers what is not obvious. With this in mind, I turn to a review of Max Müller in service of H. P. Blavatsky's interpretation of religion.

#### Interpretation/Engagement:

What I have in mind to review here is H. P. Blavatsky's acceptance, rejection, disputation, re-working, and accommodation of Max Müller's ideas in service of her own interpretive enterprise. We recall that she had identified various patterns throughout the traditions of the world and was developing a vocabulary with which to describe these functional and structural equivalencies. These patterns are hidden in religious texts, they are esoteric, and to explain why they were not identified by scholars such as Max Müller she suggests various shortcomings in their interpretive enterprises.

While H. P. Blavatsky approves of the endeavours of scholars in the field, specifically in relation to their work in new translations of texts and their undermining of Christian uniqueness and dogmatism, she also raises some criticisms. Speaking of Max Müller's "sins of omission and commission," she accuses him of a "Mosaic" bias, of dwarfing Hindu Chronology, and of not accepting Hindu knowledge of astronomy except via Greece (Blavatsky 1962, 140-1). Blavatsky is result-orientated—not method-oriented—and for this reason will have issues with methodological approaches which conclude in positions contradictory to hers. For example, unhappy with Max Müller's rejection of any connection that "the Mother of Mercury (Budha, Thot-Hermes, etc), was Maia, the mother of Buddha (Guatama), also Mâyâ, and the mother of Jesus, likewise Maya (illusion, for Mary is *Mare*,

the Sea, the great illusion symbolically)” she comments dismissively on “Bopp” and his “code of phonetic laws” (Müller 1873, 283-344; Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, xxxi-xxxii).

She makes similar points in relation to Max Müller’s “science of religion.” As he had presented a body of statements different to hers, she assured her readers that “Orientalists” lack sufficient data to present final positions, but that this will not stop them from doing so. A “scientific treatment” will not guarantee historical truthfulness, and she notes that Max Müller “makes *history* and *fact* subservient to his own conclusions, which may be very ‘scientific’ in the sight of Oriental scholars, but yet very wide of the mark of actual truth” (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, xxix-xxx). Ironically, H. P. Blavatsky is right about Max Müller, but she is oblivious to the notion that she is guilty of the same epistemic sin. Blavatsky, then, also claims the “facts” in support of her conclusions. We might smile now, but this strategy was no different from her opponents. In his exasperation with the Theosophist A. P. Sinnett, Max Müller noted that he claimed no special “authority” to ground his statements and he wrote, “I simply speak with facts and arguments. Facts require no authority nor laws of logic, whether inductive or deductive” (Müller 1901, 167). It is not my argument that Blavatsky had some insight that mainstream scholars lacked. I am arguing that they *all* had the same sins and virtues.

The disconnect between the conclusions of H. P. Blavatsky and Max Müller, and other academics, bolstered her claims of an “esoteric” wisdom in the religious traditions of the world. Academics lacked the “keys” to the universal symbology that prevented them from correctly interpreting religious texts. They read the dead letter as opposed the hidden spirit of a text (Blavatsky 1962, 140-1; Blavatsky 1982, 104; Blavatsky 1988a, vol. I, 413; Blavatsky 1993, 338). The “hidden spirit” references a collection of true propositional statements about the world, humanity, and history. She deepens her criticism of Max Müller by suggesting he knows more of Sanskrit grammar than Sanskrit thought, claiming that to understand religious texts of the past one must be “intuitively vivified by the religious spirit of old” (Blavatsky 1988a, vol. I, 582). Bosch reminds us that Max Müller also advocated becoming “ancient” oneself in order to enter the world of the past (Bosch 2002, 381). These are rhetorical flourishes on the part of both parties. We cannot become “ancient” and we do not approach the past via the same door.

Accommodation:

By accommodation I refer to the way in which H. P. Blavatsky embraced some of Max Müller's concepts into her own system. An interesting example of this is her weaving of his theory of speech development into her theory of root-races.<sup>88</sup>

For our purposes, Max Müller emphasises two points which Blavatsky has drawn into her work. The first is the developmental stages of language and the second is the linking of language to thought. Max Müller, in his *The Science of Language*, presents a morphological classification of language which has three stages, the Radical (Monosyllabic or Isolating), the Terminational Stage (Agglutinative), and the Inflectional (Amalgamating or Organic) Stage (1913, vol. I, 391-2). These stages transition due to, among other factors, the phonetic decay of the roots. Roots were the basic elements (words) which could not be reduced in any way to a more primary form (Bosch 2002, 221). This notion of phonetic decay in part explains Müller's theory of mythology as a "disease of language." An example of a language of the first stage was Chinese, of the second stage, various Turanian languages, and of the third stage Semitic and Aryan languages (Bosch 2002, 226).<sup>89</sup> The gradual forgetting of the original meanings of the roots led to the transition, according to set laws of languages through the three stages, and as Bosch remarks, "These developments would lead to the rise of mythology in which 'language was forgetting itself'" (2002, 227). The second point is Max Müller's argument that language separated humanity from the "brutes" (animal world).<sup>90</sup> Animals had no recognizable language, and the reason for this is linked to the nature of the mind. Animals lacked the capacity for reasoning and discursive thought and could not evolve what was not latent in their constitution. Bosch notes that Max Müller at one time conceived of language as a "divine gift" (2002, 192). We have noted earlier that A. R. Wallace too felt that the human mind separated humanity from the animal world – a challenge to Darwinism, a theory both Max Müller and H. P. Blavatsky also resisted (Müller 1913, vol. II, 50-86; Bosch 2002, 232).

What use did H. P. Blavatsky make of this? In *The Secret Doctrine*, her mature vocabulary is developed and she outlines the history of humanity in terms of root-races. In two places she

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<sup>88</sup>Hutton & Joseph "Back to Blavatsky: the Impact of Theosophy on modern linguistics" (1998) and Joseph *From Whitney to Chomsky: Essays in the History of American Linguistics* (2002, 71-105) draw attention to this topic in these duplicating articles, though for different reasons than myself.

<sup>89</sup>"Turanian" was a multi-faceted and problematic concept which has been discussed by Masuzawa in *The Invention of World Religions* (2005, 207-56).

<sup>90</sup>For a discussion see Lourens P. van den Bosch "Language as the barrier between brute and man" (2000).

discusses language and speech development in relation to the root-races (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. II, 198-200; 661-3). The First root-race had no language or speech, as it had no mind “on our plane,” and the Second root-race had a “sound-language” composed of “chant-like sounds of vowels.” The early Third root-race developed the beginnings of speech which resembled the sounds of nature. It is, however, during the later Third root-race that actual speech develops, as it is during this period that “mind” is awakened in humanity. It is at this point that Blavatsky accommodates some of Max Müller’s ideas. According to her, it is the later humanity of the Third root-race which develops “Monosyllabic speech” (Radical languages). The Fourth root-races (Atlantean) developed the “Agglutinative languages” (determinative element), and it was during the Fifth root-race (Aryan) that “Inflectional speech” (formative element) evolved. We recall that in Blavatsky’s outline of the evolution of humanity it is during the mid to late Third root-race that the *manasaputras* descended and awakened the unconscious humanity. Blavatsky specifically links language and speech to the mind and mental activities. She links language to both reason and thought, points which mirror Max Müller’s own concerns. But, of course, Blavatsky has a very specific understanding of the human individual, language, and humanity as a whole. She can note, for example, that early humanity could communicate via “thought-transference.” Holistically, the differences between Max Müller’s understanding of humanity, languages, and other issues and Blavatsky’s are undeniable. What is of interest here is Blavatsky’s absorption of contemporary linguistic theories into her own overarching scheme.

#### Reworking:

Max Müller proposed an origin of religion revolving around humanity’s sense of the Infinite behind the finite world. Bosch quotes Max Müller’s definition of religion from his *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873) as “a mental faculty or a disposition, which independent of, nay, in spite of sense and reason, enables man to apprehend the Infinite under different names and under different disguises” (Bosch 2002, 304). Later, sensing the limitations and problems of this specific definition, he proposed a definition which emphasised the moral dimension of religion: “Religion consists in the perception of the Infinite under such manifestations as are able to influence the moral character of man” (Bosch 2002, 311). This is in his *Natural Religion*, published in 1888, the same year as *The Secret Doctrine*. His initial definition entailed a “mental faculty,” which he viewed as “faculty for faith” and was innate and natural to humanity, absent in animals, and allowed for

the apprehension of the Infinite. It is this initial definition which caught H. P. Blavatsky's attention.

H. P. Blavatsky approvingly referenced Max Müller's *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873) regarding humanity's "faculty for apprehending the infinite" (Müller 1873, 18; Blavatsky n.d., 178-9; Blavatsky 1982, 346). We need to examine this appropriation carefully to see the reworking at play. Max Müller distinguished between "sensuous or intuitional knowledge," "rational or conceptual knowledge," and a third faculty of faith. What for Max Müller was a "faculty of faith" becomes for H. P. Blavatsky a "faculty of *Intuition*," which has no physiological or material basis. To draw out what H. P. Blavatsky is trying to say we can review G. de Purucker's Theosophical definition of religion. In part, he notes that religion is "an operation of the human spiritual mind...comprising in addition a yearning and striving towards self-conscious union with the Divine ALL" (1933, 151).<sup>91</sup> This aspect of the human is the Theosophical higher mind or *buddhi* principle, in distinction to the lower mind or emotional principles. This inner striving of the higher mind which is in sympathy with the inner invisible planes of the earth and the solar system is the root of true knowledge. This inner principle can know and "see" the workings of invisible nature and, for Blavatsky, this original knowing is the source of belief in personal immortality or "soul-survival."

This intuitional faculty, though latent in all humanity, is developed in the more evolutionarily advanced humans – *mahatmas* and *buddhas*, the founders of historical religions. What is the nature of these "advanced" humans? Gottfried de Purucker gives the following explanatory comments: they are relatively speaking "perfect men;" are in fact men and not spirits; they are evolutionary steps ahead of general humanity, and achieved this status through their own efforts and initiation; are in possession of nature's secret; and are in communication with ordinary human beings (1933, 101).<sup>92</sup> They are, in short, ordinary human beings who are one or more evolutionary steps ahead of general humanity. With this advanced evolutionary status come associated powers, mental and spiritual, sometimes referred to as the *siddhis*. In *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky conjures an image of the "first mystic" to find a way to communicate with beings on the inner planes. In her vision this "first self-made adept initiated but a select few, and kept silence with the multitudes" (1988a, vol. II, 317). In *The*

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<sup>91</sup>While not my focus here, de Purucker broadens his definition of religion with "Behind all the various religions and philosophies of ancient times there is a Secret or Esoteric Wisdom given out by the greatest Men who have ever lived, the Founders and Builders of the various world-religions and world-philosophies; and this sublime System in fundamentals has been the same everywhere over the face of the globe" (1933, 152).

<sup>92</sup>With apologies for perpetuating the gender discrimination, which is reflected in G. de Purucker's text.

*Secret Doctrine*, she rejects the idea that her theory is based on “revelation” or is “supernatural” in kind. Instead, this Theosophical “language and system of science” was “imparted” by a more advanced “mankind” and transmitted to a lesser evolved nascent humanity (Blavatsky n.d., 103; 1988a, vol. I, 573; 1988b, vol. I, 309).

These speculations revolve around Blavatsky’s anthropology. One can argue that her theory of religion is a species of natural religion. This is premised on her history of humanity based on cycles, the nature of the human individual, and the justificatory resources of the mid to late nineteenth century as they pertained to the séance and spiritualistic phenomena. If we review Peter Byrne’s categories of natural religion/revealed religion, natural religion/supernatural religion, and the idea of an innate natural religiousness, we can see Blavatsky falling on the natural side of these oppositions (Byrne 1991, 1-10). Blavatsky’s attempt at a synthesis of science, religion, and philosophy by collapsing them into a set of propositional statements about the world and humanity further challenges these divisions. Early humanity had an innate though unconscious knowledge of the inner planes and beings. This instinctive and intuitional knowledge became lost as the human race cycled into materiality, initiating the mystery schools and teachings. The teachers (*mahatmas*, masters, adepts, etc.) are, however, human beings, though older and more evolutionarily advanced than general humanity. What impedes knowledge of the “truth” are evolutionary parameters and obstacles, and simple lack of access to those truths. While it may seem challenging to read Blavatsky’s work as a theory of natural religion, we must note that Max Müller’s own conceptions are presented in the category of natural religion on much the same rationale (Bosch 2002, 310).

We can recall at this point that one of the scientific explanations for the séance and spiritualistic phenomena, including telepathy, clairvoyance, and others was that individuals gifted with them were more evolved in certain psychological areas than other human beings. While *mahatmas*, *siddhas*, adepts, sages, and so on, have histories in Asian and Western Esoteric traditions, they also had a place within mainstream Western scientific speculations of the late nineteenth century.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>See Peter French’s “The Mercurian Master” (2001) and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke’s “The Coming of the Masters” (2010) on a Western esoteric tradition inspiration for the Theosophical *mahatmas* and a study on the evolution of the *mahatma* ideal in Theosophy. Both, however, fail to emphasize the justificatory and creative power of the scientific speculations on humanity related to spiritualism and other phenomena.

## Rejection:

On some issues H. P. Blavatsky was in fundamental disagreement with Max Müller's perspectives; an example of this was his evaluation of the *Brāhmanas*. The lesson to be learnt here is the determining influence one's theoretical position can have. In *Isis Unveiled*, H. P. Blavatsky lists some of the religious texts in which the "secret doctrine" can be found hidden in allegorical form. Among these were the *Brāhmana* texts, specifically the "*Aitareya Brāhmanam*" translated by Martin Haug in 1863. She quotes Max Müller's assessment of the *Brāhmanas* as "simple twaddle," "theological twaddle," "disgust inspiring," and full of "theological absurdities" and "fantastic nonsense" (Müller 1895, 113; Blavatsky 1998a, vol. I, 580).<sup>94</sup> Max Müller's negative assessment is a theme to which she returns throughout the span of her writings. Many early mainstream Orientalists had negative opinions of the *Brāhmanas* besides Max Müller, including Arthur A. MacDonnell, William Dwight Whitney, and Julius Eggeling. (Tull 1991, 27-58; Collins 2014). The *Brāhmanas* are commentaries on the *Vedas* which latter, for Max Müller, represented a record of humanity's earliest "childhood" attempt to record the perception of the Infinite in the finite.<sup>95</sup> The *Vedas* represented a "physical" religion based on humanity's response to the natural world. The *Brāhmanas*, representing the "manhood" of humanity, are developed reflections on this original primitive response. We must smile when Strenski writes, "In Müller's view, ancient Aryan myths such as the *Vedas* were a repository of the ancient wisdom of the Aryans" (2006, 80). Meaning, however, we have realised is holistically given. While Max Müller acknowledges the simultaneous elaboration and decay of ideas in the *Brāhmanas*, Blavatsky seeks the uniform symbolism of the wisdom tradition statements, which can never decay (1982, 300). For her, only exoteric statements change, decay, or are forgotten, while esoteric truths are kept sacred.

Linked to this, in Blavatsky's reading, was a positive assessment of ancient magic and *mantra*. From this flow a number of inferences. Firstly, magic is real and a science of the ancients. Secondly, *mantras* (*mantrika-sakti*), intrinsically linked to magic, are not just meaningless words and syllables; they are parts of the "language of the gods" (Blavatsky 1988b, vol. I, 293, 464). Thirdly, Max Müller's failure to identify H. P. Blavatsky's Theosophy in these ancient texts is due to his ignorance of the "esoteric philosophy" and of

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<sup>94</sup>Max Müller adds to this list in his *A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature* describing the *Brāhmanas* as "absurd," "pedantic," "insipid," the "twaddle of idiots," and the "raving of madmen" (1859, 389).

<sup>95</sup>H. P. Blavatsky's comments on the *Vedas* are consolidated in Spierenburg's *The Veda Commentaries of H. P. Blavatsky* (1996).



the “keys,” which unlock the blinds placed in them. Did either of these scholars get the *Brāhmaṇa* texts “right”? A question like this has no sense, and to exclude readings based on some universal standard is to ignore what is happening in the process of interpretation. Religious texts are interpretation causing and are endlessly interpretable. We might say that both consistently carried the logic of their positions to their conclusion. They, in a sense, got their own theories right.

In summary, H. P. Blavatsky turned to Max Müller for support where she felt she could draw on it and as a foil where she could not. She appropriated him favourably in her arguments against any special place for Christianity and in her polemics against Darwinian evolution. She disagreed with him on the chronology of the ancient world, the existence of an esoteric dimension in religious texts, the precise value of philological speculations, the age and value of the Vedas, and many other issues. She adopted and reframed his classification of Turanian, Semite, and Aryan and critically engaged him on the meaning of *nirvana*. Max Müller was one of the dominant figures of the late nineteenth-century engagement with religion and it is, therefore, no surprise that H. P. Blavatsky drew on his works in her own interpretive endeavour. Superficial similarities between them, for example, the search for original truth, the notion that religions decay, and many others, dissipate when they are read holistically in their context. That they differed in methodological orientation is clear. They approached the issues from different perspectives drawing on and making use of the resources of the nineteenth century in individual ways, and I think a better way to conceptualise this is to say that they both wove different stories about religion, humanity, history, and the world.

## 6) CONCLUSION

H. P. Blavatsky presented a theory of religion at a time when such theories were proliferating. So important has the late nineteenth century come to be seen in the history of comparative religion that it is during this period the field has come to be regarded as professionalising. Participants in the field in the nineteenth century worked to exclude H. P. Blavatsky from the field, and subsequent histories of the field have so excluded her from their narratives. Many of the exclusionary techniques originally invoked and perpetuated were extra-scientific or scientifically dubious themselves, and have been undone by our own theory work. This narrative is changing and my own work is the conclusion of a movement, not an inauguration. The simple existence of Blavatsky’s work dispels any notion that only

university “professionals” can produce a theory of religion. That she is only now becoming legitimately regarded says more about the shortcomings of a “professional” field than it does about her work.

I have worked to stress a number of themes. The first is that H. P. Blavatsky entered the field from a particular perspective. She embraced the reality of séance and spiritualist phenomena, and this had implications for her theory. The second is that theories of religion are not separate from the larger cultural movements within society. The nineteenth century can be seen as a womb, one that gave birth to diverse theories of religion. H. P. Blavatsky existed within this environment, and is comprehensible against its background. Finally, I have emphasised the use she made of the material at hand in the development of her theory work. Theorists define their subject, use resources, and their work has a use. The use is in explanation of human behaviour and this is my theory of nineteenth-century “theories of religion.”

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## CONCLUSION

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In an underrated article, “The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres” (1984), Richard Rorty issued a call for what he termed ‘intellectual histories’ (49-75). Intellectual histories challenge existing canons and propose new canons, are disruptive and experimental, conversational and ironic, holistically contextual and historicist, boundary challenging, and revisionist. This thesis answers his call in the field of comparative religion through a study of H. P. Blavatsky’s comparative enterprise in the late nineteenth century. Blavatsky’s thoughts on religion have been subject to varied assessments, ranging from initial exclusion to a more recent qualified acknowledgement. Given that Theosophy had an interest in comparative religion from its inception, accounting for this exclusion is my research problem.

The trajectory of the academic engagement with Blavatsky’s work began in the late nineteenth century and was characterised by boundary-formation and exclusion. The founding fathers of the field of comparative religion, such as Max Müller and Herbert Spencer, dismissed her speculations on religion. This initial period was followed by one of sustained silence and is characterised by the absence of any engagement with or recognition of her work. This second period drew to an end in the 1980s and 90s when a period of re-engagement under the auspices of Western esotericism was inaugurated. This third period is characterised by a qualified, though under-researched, acknowledgment of Blavatsky’s comparative endeavour. More recently, scholars in the actual field of comparative religion, such as David Chidester, Gauri Viswanathan, and J. Barton Scott, have shown an increasing awareness of Blavatsky’s comparative religion and its attendant interpretive strategies. My assessment of these more recent studies is that they retain problematic aspects of the inherited exclusionary and normative narrative which was negotiated in the late nineteenth century. My own work guides this trajectory to its next logical step by presenting an argument for the inclusion of Blavatsky in histories of the field of comparative religion. H. P. Blavatsky is shown to have presented a justifiable, reasoned, strategic, and coherent enterprise in comparative religion. Its exclusion from the history of the field is no longer sustainable.

In chapter one, to address my research problem, I posed the research question: What is the nature and characteristic of H. P. Blavatsky’s enterprise in comparative religion? To answer this question I worked to recover her comparative religion, and to locate her effort in its late

nineteenth-century context. My original contribution is in respect to this recovery and historicising.

From its inception, the Theosophical Society had an explicit interest in interpreting and comparing religions. Thus far, there has been no study dedicated to recovering Blavatsky's work in this field. This study addresses the lacuna. In working to understand Blavatsky's comparative enterprise I have sought a guiding or orienting principle that underlaid her approach. Jonathan Z. Smith provided the first clue to this orienting principle. He pointed to the importance of various comparative sciences, including comparative anatomy and comparative philology, in the development of the field of comparative religion. Discussing his morphological mode of comparison, he highlighted the following characteristics of this style of comparison – synthetic, structural, synchronic and phenomenological – which seemed indicative of Blavatsky's interpretive moves (1971, 80-5).

It is, however, Daston and Galison's *Objectivity* (2007) that provided a foundation for my thesis. Daston and Galison proposed three codes which formed the basis for various epistemic positions in the sciences. The codes they proposed are truth-to-nature, mechanical objectivity, and trained judgement, and it is the first code that is characteristic of Blavatsky's comparative method. While trained judgement followed mechanical objectivity which followed truth-to-nature, the new codes do not eliminate the preceding style. Instead, the new codes are added to the old and all codes remain, once in existence, available and operative at any time.

Daston and Galison trace their truth-to-nature epistemic code in a number of scientific disciplines, including, anatomy, botany, mineralogy, and zoology. The persona of the scientist who engaged in this code was that of the "sage" who "selected," "synthesised," and looked for "universals" (2007, 371). This scientist worked to correct the variables, imperfections, and contingencies of nature, and sought universal, essential, and underlying types. They sought the essence or the perfect form, and to do this they approached their subject through reason, imagination, selection, and rejection. These "epistemic virtues" characterise the comparative endeavour of Blavatsky. She too sought the true form of religion, and I have traced the evolution of this form or type of the true religion by referencing diagrams in her two major works, *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*.

The diagrams in her works are graphic representations of her conceptions. Blavatsky found, or imposed (there are many potential metaphors), a pattern which she located in the religious texts of the world. She presented her Theosophical statement as the original type, of which

the historical religions were reflections of varying completeness. Her Theosophy, as a body of teachings, is then the primordial type and structure of all religions. While I have focused on the diagrams found throughout Blavatsky's works, I have argued that religion, for her, was conceived of as a body of propositional statements about the world, history, and humanity. She presented these propositions in continuity with and in opposition to competing visions of the world in the late nineteenth century, specifically in relation to scientific and religious views of the world. The importance of Daston and Galison's truth-to-nature epistemic code is that it links Blavatsky to a general mode and style of investigation and research that provided a foundation for much recognised scientific speculation. She participated, then, in a basic scientific mode of engaging with a subject, and this orienting, justifying, and explanatory link has been missing in studies of Blavatsky's Theosophy.

Blavatsky's quest for a comprehensive typology of religion, uncorrupted and complete, led into a search for the original or first religion, an *urform*. Blavatsky's mature Theosophical statement reveals the parameters of this original religion. While she posits an original religion, lost in the past of humanity, she only fully reveals its parameters towards the end of her life in *The Secret Doctrine*. I have traced the evolution of her ideas across her works by focusing on her vocabulary and pattern development. I have argued that the coming together of her coping vocabulary and her structuring insight into a harmonised, coherent, systematised, and reasoned whole, in *The Secret Doctrine*, is the conclusion of her comparative enterprise. What follows are applications, revisions, minor refinements, elaborations, and corrections.

To understand Blavatsky's co-option and adoption of a wide variety of terms from philosophy, religion, and science I have invoked a semantic holism. A holistic approach allows for the shifts in meaning that many of these recognizable terms underwent when placed in her broader system. This evolution and development in her technical vocabulary, her novel use of existing terms, does not reflect her ignorance of what the terms (may have) meant in their original context. It reflects her conscious attempt to express her own unfolding vision. Blavatsky measured the religions of the world against her complete grid, and her work is corrective, correcting, amplifying, and shaping. To aid in her recovery of Theosophy (the wisdom tradition, esoteric tradition, or occult tradition) in the various religions and philosophies of the world, she harnessed a number of additional supporting interpretive techniques, including functional equivalences, symbolism, allegory, keys, blinds, and many

more. Blavatsky used these subsidiary manoeuvres to insert, locate, assemble, and identify her statement on religious texts.

H. P. Blavatsky's Theosophy did not pre-exist her presentation. Nor is the mature Theosophy of her later writings already in existence in her earlier works. While the seeds of her final system are sown in *Isis Unveiled*, it is a number of years before her vocabulary and structure are tightly woven together into a self-sustaining, self-justifying, and coherent whole. Blavatsky's interpretive endeavour has shortcomings, but they do not pertain to the usual charges aimed at her. I have worked to show that her works are not irrational, that an "idiosyncratic" assessment can be viewed as a compliment from a Rortyan perspective, and that her works are not beside the point – that is, they are, in fact, pragmatically interpretive. She presents a reasoned and coherent explanation of religion based on an assessment of the resources available in the nineteenth century. Certainly, she read the nineteenth century and its resources in a certain way, but any era is open to varying narrative readings.

Her shortcomings revolve around competing theories of religion, which drew attention to certain aspects therein that she ignored or felt inessential. For example, her enterprise was almost exclusively text-based and ignored or under-valued, among other dimensions, ritualism and the institutional side of religion. Her interpretive shortcomings also relate to failings which characterised various fields in general, for example, anachronism. Her approach is, therefore, one-dimensional by our standards. We must, however, acknowledge two points. The first is that many of the same charges, for example, that theories are too text-based, were raised against more recognized theorists of her day. The second is that all theories have shortcomings and are subject to criticism from alternate perspectives.

The place of H. P. Blavatsky and her Theosophy has been described in a number of studies. These studies, drawing on her references to an esoteric tradition, locate her in a Western wisdom tradition. I have challenged these studies by deploying a number of recent methodological and theoretical perspectives which allow for a re-description of various late nineteenth-century knowledge fields. I began by discerning two movements. One was Blavatsky's justificatory appeal to the séance phenomena and occult sciences. The other was the general idea that various fields of study are described as becoming scientific, disciplined, and professionalized during the last third of the nineteenth century. To draw these two observations together I examined various interpretive positions and responses to the spiritualist séance phenomena of the late nineteenth century.

To enter these debates from a new perspective one needs to challenge existing views. One needs to disrupt popular, inherited narratives in order to impose a new description on the field. To accomplish this opening gesture I have drawn on and referenced theorists who have challenged normative and teleological conceptions of the scientific endeavour. These theorists include: Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, Alun Munslow, Thomas Gieryn, Gavin Flood, Roger Luckhurst, and Richard Noakes. This challenge to normal science is essential to my broader argument as certain scientific perspectives underlie the interpretive theories which are the subject of histories of comparative religion. Blavatsky's writings reveal a dual orientation of attraction and repulsion to various developing nineteenth-century sciences.

Thomas Gieryn examines the negotiations, debates, arguments, and justifications that characterise the boundary work of distinguishing science from pseudo-science. Foucault reminds us that these negotiations are not innocent, and that a politics is implicit in our claims to knowledge and in our very knowledge itself. Notions of knowledge fields disciplining and professionalising are implicit in the processes of boundary-marking. Boundaries are, however, continually and inherently contested, and this explains Blavatsky's ambivalent and ambiguous orientation to science. The scientific enterprise was itself conflicted and ambiguous. While we tend to read the history of science from a teleological perspective, a more historicist and synchronic assessment of the late nineteenth century reveals a more complex story. Scholars such as Frank M. Turner, Roger Luckhurst, Richard Noakes, and Matthew Stanley have recovered various forms of legitimate and mainstream science which were not indebted to scientific naturalism. As an entry point to these conflicts and negotiations, I have presented three responses to the séance and spiritualist phenomena in the 1870s.

In chapter two, I reviewed the responses of E. B. Tylor, A. R. Wallace, and H. P. Blavatsky to the spiritualist phenomena. While there were many other responses to these phenomena, Tylor and Wallace are illuminating for my purposes because both were recognized professionals in their respective fields. From these three actors we learnt two things. Firstly, the phenomena were capable of being conceptualised in various ways by intelligent and reasoned actors. Secondly, one's reading of the phenomena could have direct implications for theories of religion. Tylor, who adopted an evolutionary paradigm, sensed duplicity and fraud in the séance parlour, projected his assessment back into the history of religion and found the same tendencies among "savages" and "primitives." Wallace, who found himself converted by the "facts" of the spiritualist phenomena, incorporated the reality of these facts into his

evolutionary theory. Blavatsky, who emerged, in part, from the spiritualist milieu, was convinced of and participated in the phenomena from the beginning. The consequences of her stance permeate her theory of religion. *Isis Unveiled* is a useful compendium of nineteenth-century boundary negotiations over the reality of the séance and spiritualist phenomena. I have argued that we should not valorise one perspective over the other and instead we should embrace the idea that all actors were rational and warranted in their assessments. Roger Luckhurst's notion that we see the scientific engagement with spiritualist phenomena as "emergent" is a powerful justificatory re-description of the field. Once this re-description is enabled, the consequences for how we read alternate theories of religion are far-reaching. New actors begin to surface, and this thesis has focused on one such participant.

In addition to the consequences of a wider, more inclusive reading of the nineteenth century, Richard Rorty has provided the philosophical tools to review this period. Rorty's historicist, pragmatic, anti-essentialist, and anti-foundationalist perspective has guided my thesis. Rorty's work can be used as a tool to re-examine past debates, and to re-describe them for new purposes. His critique of epistemology undermines all grand truth claims of the past (and present). This is important as it forces a reassessment of past debates without the normative values of inherited histories. We can recover lost voices, perspectives, and positions which a "victor's history" has obscured. Rorty's distinction between normative and revolutionary thought lends support to Luckhurst's emergent thesis. Rorty's critique, however, does something else of importance. Once we relinquish the idea that we are getting closer and closer to the "truth" of the world as it is in itself, shorn of human description, we replace it with a notion of narrative. We come to realise that we are telling stories, about ourselves and the world, and we do so to satisfy our own varying human needs.

I have found Alun Munslow's notion of deconstructive history, that history is an act of narrative making, a suggestive tool to do two things. These are, challenging inherited histories and composing my own narrative. While a narrative view has become less popular in contemporary theorising of religion, the application of a Rortyan perspective makes its application inevitable. Munslow echoes Rorty's critique of epistemology and representation and applies it to the field of history. A consequence of this is his call for experimental and conversational histories. Of the many points Munslow raises, his emphasis on the power and responsibility of the "historian as author" and the consequences flowing from the historian's selection of the "story space" were of especial use to my theorising. On the one hand, they allowed me to identify the choices (selections and rejections) made by other historians. The



application and implication of selection, emphasis, and use for specific purposes are clear in existing studies of Theosophy. On the other hand, they forced me to be conscious of my own preferences. In my tale, I de-emphasise Blavatsky's links to the esoteric and occult milieu of the nineteenth century and try to draw attention to the various mainstream thought trends that she drew on. I also separate Blavatsky's Theosophy from the Theosophical streams which succeeded her. Usually, reference is made to the Theosophy of Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater, but there are, in fact, a variety of post-Blavatsky Theosophical orientations.

Scholars who emphasise the esoteric or occult nature of Blavatsky's enterprise make a number of assumptions that I challenge. Firstly, they have not appreciated the power of Rorty's critique of epistemology. Once this is admitted, all claims to truth and knowledge can be reassessed on an equal basis. This allows for a recovery of marginalised efforts in a wide variety of fields. In a sense, it makes the very notion of marginalisation less interesting. Secondly, they have failed to note the broad appeal of spiritualistic phenomena to nineteenth-century society. Spiritualistic phenomena demanded a response from the common person, the educated elite, the aristocracy, and from prominent scientists of the day. The rhetorical power of the terms "esoteric" and "occult" is to distance and de-familiarise, and I have tried to counter this trend. Finally, they have ignored Blavatsky's use of many mainstream ideas of her time. Certainly, she appropriated and reworked some of them, but this was done within the bounds of rational inference. Blavatsky's works existed in the nineteenth century and make sense in the nineteenth century. This is an important point. It is not my argument that Blavatsky should be heard as a simple consequence of a metaphysical relativism. It is my argument that Blavatsky made warranted use of the nineteenth-century sources available, that her enterprise has been obscured by normative histories of the period, and that the nature of her works demand that she be included among the community of reasoned commentators on religion of the period.

One consequence of conceding that H. P. Blavatsky produced a legitimate theory of religion is that a number of binaries are challenged, one of which is the value of distinguishing between professional and amateur theories of religion. That the academy is showing an increasing awareness of her comparative enterprise is the rectification of an oversight internal to the academic environment – no Theosophist will be surprised by this turn of events. That the academy wilfully blinded itself to her enterprise is further revealed when one realises that at least one mainstream actor, Herbert Spencer, could not be regarded as a professional scholar, if by that one means university employed.

Abroad implication of applying Rortyan pragmatism is that many entrenched distinctions are undermined. His focus on “use for purpose” accomplishes the change of vocabulary, the re-description, which he aimed for. My own challenge, however, flows as much from his call for contextualising in historical studies. The literature around Blavatsky and her Theosophical enterprise still invokes distinctions between science/pseudo-science, science of religion/theology, religious studies/religion, rational/irrational, and insider/outsider. I have laboured to show that her work, when contextualised by more charitable (in a Davidsonian sense) descriptions of various fields in the nineteenth century, transgressed these boundaries and that it is more fruitful to evaluate her contribution without them. This re-description reveals Blavatsky to be in reasoned communication with the fullness of the late nineteenth century, which is reflected in her work either by absence or presence, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly.

Certainly, there is value in diachronic, teleological studies of the history of theorising about religion. They do, however, also have shortcomings. Diachronic studies struggle to recapture the depth of actors in any historical period and impose boundaries which guide their selection and rejection of specific participants. I have favoured a synchronic, contextualist perspective which allows for the recapturing of lost voices in the study of religion. I have proposed that the late nineteenth century be conceptualised as a womb or matrix from which many theories of religion emerged. These theories were in conversation with each other and, to some extent, make sense only in this conversational environment. My methodological underpinnings enable the recovery of theories without imposing hierarchical evaluations on these orientations. Perhaps, synchronic and diachronic studies are motivated by different impulses. Diachronic studies, as Rorty noted, skip from “peak to peak” selecting the “best” examples and perspectives. Synchronic studies highlight the contingency of our all our ideas and reveal alternate conceptions of being human in the world. I think it important to note, in the field of comparative religion, that all theories of religion are explanatory, and that all theories of the nineteenth century have been rendered suspect by our own guiding lights.

What, then, are we doing in the academic study of religion? To broaden the question: what were late nineteenth-century theorists of religion doing when confronting and creating the religious data of the world? Are we engaged in the same activity? It is obvious that we are all presenting explanations and interpretations of religion. Reviewing the comparative endeavours of the nineteenth century it is apparent that they were implicated in the broader encounter with non-European cultures, the colonial project, and that they drew on

developments in the sciences and philosophy of the time. By implication, then, the study of religion revolved around negotiations of what it meant to be human, the history of humanity, and the nature of the world. The writings of H. P. Blavatsky certainly reveal this preoccupation with explaining the place of humanity in the world. This observation is another way in which the nineteenth-century science of religion should not be too markedly separated from religious presentations of the world – both classified and delineated the parameters of the world and humanity.

Is this, however, the nature of the field in the twenty-first century? Are we engaged in negotiating the place and nature of the human being in the world? My answer would be a qualified, yes. Either consciously or unconsciously, by reflecting the various scientific, sociological, and intellectual movements, opportunities, and positions available to us we are endorsing and reinforcing implicit ontological commitments. There is one clear difference between nineteenth-century and contemporary studies of religion, which is highlighted by Nancy Frankenberry. Frankenberry is committed to a definition of religion which includes reference to “superhuman agents” (2014, 196). I do not feel, however, that this maps unproblematically onto the nineteenth century as the scientific enterprise too could justifiably reference such agents. The extent to which students of religion can bring these habits, of reflecting our broader justificatory environment, into conscious light will determine the capacity to transgress what is determined and allow for the production of novel theories of religion, and ourselves. Theories of religion have a use—they are part of the broader processes of describing ourselves to ourselves, for ourselves. David Chidester produced a definition of religion, the first part of which proposes that religion involves a negotiation of what it means to be “human in a human place.” This is also, implicitly, what the study of religion does. I do not embrace, here, the balance of Chidester’s definition as, flowing from my assessment of the boundary-marking of the nineteenth century, I do not want to distinguish the student of religion from the believer, or the study of religion from its object. That the study of religion is no longer seen as central to this descriptive process of what it means to be human reflects the diminished place of religion in the larger intellectual atmosphere of our time.

Given my own assumptions and theoretical background I cannot suggest that this study concludes any conversation, though I have gestured towards positions I find more interesting. The purpose of studying religion is to explain the category and the phenomena. However, all theories of religion offer an explanation of what religion is. I have no doubt that the future will bring forth many more interpretive descriptions of religion. The purpose of histories of

the study of religion is to recover all interpretive efforts. Why should we do this? Rorty, again, provides the answers. He argues that there will never be a final explanation of any phenomena, including religion. The capacity for re-description is infinite, and once we admit that no human phenomena have an “essence” waiting only for the right descriptive vocabulary we will see the logic of this stance. Rorty reminds us of the contingency of our descriptions of human endeavours, both of the past, and more tellingly, in the present. Rorty, further, notes that we would not recognize the “truth,” in any metaphysical sense, even if it were presented. The truth would be just another story we tell ourselves for ourselves. And, if any tale, any uniform “capacity for religion” or “mode of production” were ever admitted as the final truth, I suspect it would become almost immediately uninteresting.

The perspective I have offered signals the need for more contextualised studies of Blavatsky’s positions on the various sciences. For example, I have inferred that the conclusions of this study of Blavatsky’s enterprise in comparative religion— that she was a reasoned, coherent, and rational participant – can be generalised across her works. While I have pointed to other scholars who have intimated a similar position, further studies in a variety of fields are required to confirm this stance. A second issue this study raises is whether a synchronic study can provide convincing explanations of all religious phenomena. (Though, I have not made any such claim). I have offered a cogent argument for the inclusion of Blavatsky’s position into the centre of nineteenth-century life. But, what could a synchronic assessment of Theosophy in the twentieth-first century offer? This is somewhat more obscure to me. Current Theosophy is the inheritor of a 140-year history which constrains it. Blavatsky had no such commitments or constraints. Perhaps, a diachronic assessment of contemporary Theosophy, where its commitments to its own past are admitted, would be as fruitful. I have purposely confined my study to Blavatsky’s comparative religion in the nineteenth century, but I concede that broader studies have value too. For example, terms which were under negotiation in the nineteenth century, including science, religion, and esotericism, reflected more settled meanings as time unfolded and distinctions hardened. Theosophy, I suspect, lost some of its justificatory links to the wider scientific environment. Any broader study must, however, be based on historically-based engagements with any topic, such as I have presented here.

In this thesis, I have laboured to dismantle current assessments of Blavatsky’s Theosophy through a wide-ranging re-description of the late nineteenth century. Disrupting a dominant

narrative is, however, not the work of single text. It is the result of multiple interventions, of which this study of the comparative religion of H. P. Blavatsky is one.

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